H. Beadon
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ILLUSIONS. Nov 1887

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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BOOK THE FOURTH.

ILLUSIONS.

CHAPTER I.

ICONOCLASM.

"Even a worm will turn, Miss McCracken," said Apollo sulkily, with a determination to put an end to the alternations of the young lady's favour.

"Yes, Mr. Longstaffe, I have seen them do it; but generally to be crushed on the other side," answered Rachel, without apparent significance. Her eyes were demurely cast down on the fur trimmings of her skirt. If Apollo had been less serious in his love-making, he would have

laughed at Rachel's apt rejoinder, but as it was he was only offended thereby.

They were skating on the big water in Lakenham Park, and the lady, being as yet an infirm performer, leant heavily upon her companion's arm. Apollo had liked it very well till they began to disagree. It was all about nothing, of course. Miss McCracken had made an appointment with her cavalier for the previous day, and had turned him over to go and lunch with the Proteus's. She was enjoying herself vastly at the present time, and did not find room to regret Sir Bruce's absence. There was to be a ball next week in the town hall at Bedmondstone, and she was already planning fresh conquests.

Lady Wrexham had not flinched from her resolve, for this festivity was of her instigation. Old Mrs. Ringrose was rampant at this audacious dissipation—such a novelty in the month of January! Her

faction laughed covertly at this effort of the countess to take an independent position. Of course the affair would be a failure without the patronage of Ringrose Abbey. Lady Wrexham might induce the townspeople to go, with, perhaps, the officers and smaller fry of the vicinity, but what county folks would think of driving eight or ten miles on a January night *without a moon?* That was a great omission on her ladyship's part—the moon. It clearly denoted her inexperience in organizing festivities. The autumnal county ball was a movable festival, fixed at Mrs. Ringrose's nod; and she, of course, always arranged that there was a moon.

Very pretty indeed Rachel appeared on the first day of skating, in her coquettish attire of scarlet and black, with an astrakhan cap perched on her fair head.

"*Diablesse!*" muttered some angry spectator, watching her restless coquetry. It

was not Miss Dormer, I vouch, who used that naughty word. It might have been our decorous little friend Letty, for she had been at Boulogne last summer, where she might have picked up a few naughty words at the *Casino*. Certainly Rachel's eyes sparkled mischievously, and there was a spicy air about her which might suggest thoughts of brimstone.

Very sore at heart was the neglected rosebud as the afternoon wore on. She was so painfully conscious of her shabby jacket, and ostrich feathers out of curl. They confessed so unkindly that they were not *real* tips. Alas! to be poor is a great evil when a fair maid would fain look lovely in the eyes of the one she hopes to win. Letty had snubbed Donald Nichol early in the day, when he had offered a helping hand, thinking that Apollo would certainly come to her assistance by-and-by. Donald, being a true Scotchman, was phi-

losophical in affairs of love, and had some time since recognized Miss McCracken's cold shoulder. He was of a race that die from time to time, but never prematurely, for sweet love's sake. He transferred his admirations with the ease of a Turk. He was an "all round" young man with the less important female beauties of the vicinity. The "tocher" of biscuits, as I have said, he soon discovered was not for him, and his avaricious parent was constrained to swallow his disappointment.

"Dinna ye mind, Donald lad. Ye maunna be discouridgt. There's gey lasses i' Glasgow, wi' siller to spare, that wunna be sae mim."

Yet Rachel was scarcely a young person to be described as prudish; neither was Donald to be classed with young men who were easily discouraged. He found Letty's face to-day, pouting as it was, fair to look at. In spite of her crown of

straightened feathers, the little maid was winsome enough. But she would have none of Donald's advances, and sent him off, by some means, at a break-neck speed across the ice. But, after all, it was no use for Letty to cast her eyes in the direction of Apollo. Rachel kept him well out of the way, chattering incessantly, and clinging to his arm in a very dependent way. This young lady's laughter jarred frequently on the unhappy maid's jealous ears.

Philomela, too, who was also a beginner, was full of mirth over her own misfortunes, though she had no cavalier to help her slips, falls, and disasters. The dumb girl's blue eyes danced with keen enjoyment as she tottered and stumbled with the aid of a chair and stick. Her animated finger-language kept Medea hovering near her. Happy Phil, who knew nothing of the woe of malice and envy entailed by lovers, whom no anguish of jealousy or suspense

ever assailed! This joyous child of silence was ever weaving sunshine out of dull lights, gilding the commonplace with her own incomparable contentment, making everyday matters bright with her own radiant spirit. Rosy, panting, with her serge dress marked about the knees with patches of snow, her laughing eyes looked to Medea for approval of every step. This one, the guardian angel following behind her so gracefully, quickly answered every sign, expressing constant encouragement and praise.

In the course of the day the greater part of the population of Lakenham came and looked on at the animated scene. Mr. McCracken had caused it to be made known that he would have no objection to the public use of the grounds during the frost. It was Medea who was the unconscious means of this extension of privilege.

"It is such a pity there is no public water anywhere about, where every one

can enjoy skating. I am so sorry for all the children in Lakenham," she had said in a careless way.

"They are no worse off now than they have always been," said Mr. McCracken, casting a suspicious glance at Medea.

"Oh yes ; indeed they are. Before any one lived here—I mean, when Sir Lionel Charteris was away—all the neighbourhood was admitted to Lakenham water." Suddenly catching the look of reproof in Apollo's eyes, she coloured deeply. "But —but, of course, I know, Mr. McCracken, no one expects it now," she said, vainly endeavouring to retrieve her ground.

"Favours of that kind are apt to be abused," replied Mr. McCracken pompously. "Having to rub shoulders on the ice with ploughboys might be disagreeable even to such a radical young lady as you." Here he smiled with a sort of absolving patronage. "I am all for class distinctions, you

know, Miss Longstaffe. I am proud to say I am exclusive by nature."

"Are you?" she said, drawing a long breath. "I think I am not. I should not care even to go to heaven by myself."

Mr. McCracken looked scandalized; but it ended in his telling Mr. Pilkington that admittance to the park would be given to all respectable people in the parish while the skating lasted.

Late on this afternoon, when Letty was wheeling about solitary, with a heavy heart, but tears bravely repressed, the Pilkingtons and Mr. McCracken appeared at the edge of the mere. Mr. Tom Ringrose, who had driven over in company with Dick, arrived at the same moment, carrying the latest invention in skates. The Dobbs boys hovered about him, watching anxiously to see how the curious mechanism of knife-blades could be attached. But their owner changed his mind concern-

ing their use, and flung them aside on the bank with a gesture of dissatisfaction. Tom had caught sight of Medea supported by Donald Nichol's hand—not for guidance, certainly, for none there present could skate as well as she could.

This is a chapter devoted to the knocking down of idols, and some will get sorely bruised and chipped and evilly entreated.

Catching a glimpse of Mr. McCracken afar off, Rachel astutely divined that it would not gratify his paternal ambition to perceive that she was coquetting with an insignificant subaltern while more eligible men were in view. Without Apollo's immediate perception, she steered him in the direction of Tom Ringrose. Many trips and slips and much gripping of his arm required her companion's constant attention. But, arrived near her goal, the artful maid dropped her support with a sweet, "Thank you. I'm afraid I've been very

troublesome. Of your charity, Mr. Longstaffe, go and help some one else. Little Miss Pilkington has been looking anxiously towards you."

What a dagger Rachel planted in her little rival's breast! For Letty was near enough to hear.

Apollo lifted his hat and departed swiftly, vowing fierce vengeance on the fickle siren. But Letty would have nothing to say to him now. He realized bitterly that it was possible to be crushed "on the other side."

The little maid had a good, brave spirit behind her baby face. When Apollo approached her she was fully engrossed with Mr. Brown. This cleric had come to the lake for relaxation from onerous domestic duties. He poured forth his tribulations in Letty's sympathetic ear—an ear so full of pity that it was deaf to Apollo's invitation.

"Now, would you believe it, Miss Letty,

with two invalid ladies on my hands I am equal to managing the twins. I really deserve some praise, for I've made an invention which deserves the gratitude of all nurses and mothers. I've hit upon a plan, both safe and convenient, whereby I can control unruly children. Mrs. Brown is very anxious for me to send the idea to the *Queen* newspaper."

The sandy-haired little parson possessed a vast fund of hope and jollity. He rose above all disaster. Adverse circumstances never long depressed him. He danced at balls with all the wall-flowers by turn, quavered in his weak tenor at village concerts, and was ever ready to take a neighbouring rector's funerals or christenings on the shortest notice. He was deservedly well liked. In the game season his larder never lacked, and no hothouses in the vicinity forgot to minister to him of grapes and peaches.

"Do let me hear your plan! It might be of some service to mamma. Our babies are often very unmanageable," said Letty, with intense interest in Mr. Brown's subject. Apollo, as he hovered near for the chance of another word, could only see the tip of her ear.

"Well, as I dare say you know, the twins are a quarrelsome pair. They enjoy tearing each other's hair and biting each other's noses. All spirit, their mamma will have it. I spent a whole day considering how I could safely leave them at home. As you may know, during Mrs. Brown's illness I have been kept a prisoner entirely on their account. However, I got the blacksmith to fix a ring on each side of the dining-room, in the wall, and attach a steel chain to it. I secure each of the children with a strong leather belt which is buckled to the chain. I clear all the furniture out of the way and leave them

tethered. They can't climb out of the window or do any fighting. In fact, they are completely safe as long as the wall holds fast. They howled for an hour the first day, but are getting quite used to it now."

Presently Letty went off across the lake, hand in hand with Mr. Brown, still giving close attention to his family history. Apollo was left desolate, and consoled himself wrathfully with figure eights.

Mr. McCracken had, meanwhile, ventured cautiously over the ice to where Medea and Philomela stood together. Medea's skate had come loose, and her sister vainly endeavoured to secure the strap. This the observant admirer had seen from afar. It behoved him to hasten to the lady's assistance, only hastening was a difficult matter for an obese gentleman under such slippery circumstances.

"My goodness!" said Rachel to Tom

Ringrose, with admirably feigned distress; "just look at papa! He's down on his knees. He will catch his death of cold!"

Tom had seen Donald Nichol bow his adieu to Medea, and was on the point himself of putting on his skates now. But he promptly found his eyeglass at Rachel's words, muttering something indistinct about no fools and old fools. Rachel did not affect to perceive any note of comparison in this remark.

"I am sure Miss Longstaffe will be sorry to distress Mr. McCracken so much," said Tom, attempting satire.

"He will only be too happy to assist her, Mr. Ringrose. Papa admires her immensely, you know, and she is very polite to him. A superior intelligence is, of course, always interesting to her, and papa's conversation is so very instructive at times."

Was she chaffing? Tom suspected some

sarcasm, but vainly endeavoured to detect any sign of mirth on Rachel's features. He wished he could tell her that her father was a vulgar brute not fit to black Medea's shoes.

"I say, Uncle Tom, look here! I've come to skate with you and the others. I've got a new pair, and they cost eighteen bob. Ma said you was to see I didn't break my neck. Grandma has been to lunch at Ellesmore; and, my eye! didn't she just make a shindy about a ball somewhere! She said that ma was bringing down her grey hairs in sorrow, and you, too, Uncle Tom, are worse than a prodigal son, she said, because you are making eyes at some 'artful hussy.' She wouldn't name any names before me, of course. Then ma she got in a rage, and told granny to mind her own business, and said that I should go to Lakenham water and take a leaf out of Uncle Tom's book, since grandma had

brought him up. I say, are you the 'artful hussy'?"

The boy had come across the grass without being observed by Rachel or her companion. Tom stared at the salutation he received from his precocious nephew. Rachel rather enjoyed his discomfiture.

"I dare say, you nice, plain-speaking little boy, that I am one of the artful hussies. No doubt your grandmamma thinks Uncle Tom knows a good many. I am Miss McCracken."

The little Lord Ellesmore was busy with his straps, but he looked up at this information.

"Oh, are you? You ain't really a bit like the old biscuit-man. Uncle Tom, ma said she was coming to fetch me by-and-by, and granny's eyes rolled just awful when she said it. It is fun to see her in a real wax. I say, do you want a tip for the Two Thousand? Peter and me we know

a thing or two. Ma doesn't know I go about the stables in Oldford; but I do, and when I grow up I mean to run horses of my own. Do you know our filly has been entered for the Slobsly Stakes? Don't you go and blow to granny. Ain't these first-rate skates? That queer old woman, Miss Godbold, she tipped me a sov to buy 'em. She is a game one; granny can't come any grand airs over her."

Then the boy, having secured his skates, shot off with his head and body much in advance of his legs.

Miss Pilkington's last lingering hopes were shattered when she saw Mr. McCracken go down on his knees before Medea.

"A man of his years to make such a fool of himself in public! It's disgraceful!"

Down went the idol of her adoration with a crash.

Letty, smiling affably towards Mr. Brown, yet had rage and jealousy gnawing at her

heart. She said to herself, "No, I never, never can believe in him again." This was only an eclipse, total, but temporary. The sun-god would by-and-by smile upon her, and her heart would be eased of its burden of rancour.

Tom Ringrose, reflecting on Medea's behaviour, said also to himself several times, "Women are all of the same breed." This he repeated so frequently that at last he began to fancy there was originality in this self-evident reflection. He now believed that the calm and dignified maiden, the pure-eyed one, who, without ogling or coquetry, had suffered his advances, was yet ready to deliver herself over to the wooing of a vulgar city *parvenu*. Yes, indeed; his fair divinity had fallen from the pedestal on which he had placed her. He would go home and see her no more. He would not go to Laura's ball. He would at once pack up his traps and be off

to the North Pole. No, it was yet too early, and the season was inclement. Then he would go to Patagonia. Why not? Only, Tom was not quite sure where it was, though he had heard there was good sport there. Then what about his kit? Let us leave Tom a while chewing the cud of mortified vanity and reflecting on his baggage.

Alas, for Apollo! As I have said, he had not the feeble satisfaction of taking up a second string. Letty had spurned him. Hitherto she had been becomingly grateful for humble meed of notice. He was very angry; for the greater light, that ruled the day in his mind, was a heartless flirt, a girl with no more feeling than a stock or stone, a doll stuffed with sawdust, a waxen image, a butterfly, and so on. These similes called upon Apollo's mind while he swore that he recognized Rachel's hollowness and unworthiness. He would

never believe in any woman again—he would not be trifled with by vain coquettes.

Behind all these trivial and unimportant dethronements, another idol lay prone in its death-clothes. Its beauty was all defaced, and the same pure worship would never be offered to it again.

Oh, Mr. McCracken, kneeling before Medea, I think if you could have guessed how little her great eyes saw of your commonplace aspect as they rested so calmly upon you, the stings of mortification would have promptly raised you to your feet! She saw you, but yet her thoughts were far away, and the fixed regard was an absent one.

"You deserted the party most cruelly the other evening, Miss Longstaffe. Capital supper Pilkington gave us. It really made me think better of the old spinster who rules his roost. A *mayonnaise*, I give you my word, as good as my *chef* could

turn out. I was expecting to see you at the rectory. Miss Pilkington assured me you were coming, or I should have waited to try and induce you to join us."

By this time Medea's loose skate was once more adjusted.

"I was very tired; I went home. Miss Pilkington knew I was not coming to supper."

"You were exhausted with your efforts, I have no doubt," said Mr. McCracken, with urbane patronage in his tones. "You really—er—took us all by storm with your magnificent playing. My only regret was you had such a poor instrument."

But Medea was not thinking of Mr. McCracken's words as she looked gravely over his head. At the mention of that evening her thoughts went back to the scene that had been enacted outside the school-house. She recalled the long night of sorrow she had spent after she had gone

home, carrying the broken bits of her bygone worship with her.

Alas! that the falling down of idols must so often crush the poor believers. For does not the shattering of any earnest love or faith make our whole life aimless and void of meaning?

Happy are those who can build up again, on a ruined past, some hope still fair and full of promise.

CHAPTER II.

DAWS PECKING.

No doubt a blind hen occasionally lights upon a barleycorn, and cackles of its own extraordinary perceptions to a credulous poultry-yard. Possibly the ruling chanticleer may on occasions be anxious to do honour to hereditary fowl instinct, in preference to referring the exceptional event to a direct guiding of Providence.

Far be it from me to deny to the most obtuse and dim-sighted mortal the occasional discovery of some truth or momentous matter. Yet, for the sake of a sudden flash of light or rare gleam of intelligence, are we bound for ever to rely on the perspicacity of that individual?

Posing as a prophetess, and the saviour of the family honour, Laura had made herself uncommonly disagreeable all round. Her mind was not remarkably discerning or acute ; but twice in her life she had had the good luck to light upon a discreditable fact—to her a barleycorn. As a matter of course, she demanded thereafter that her relatives should place implicit faith in her intuitions when she scented mischief. This they were naturally not always ready to do.

The first disclosure which had thrown credit on her perceptions was Tom's doubtful contract with the siren, Miss Leonora St. Clair, whose claims, after a little trouble, had been quashed.

The second finding Laura was not at liberty to cry aloud on the housetops, as it nearly concerned her lord. Here she was under that disagreeable embargo, discretion, to make no open revelation of folly. The holding her peace was not pleasant.

In private life his lordship did smart considerably beneath the whip-hand of his wife; but, whatever betided the Ellesmore household, Mrs. Ringrose must never know.

Laura—so she said—had saved her husband from utter ruin some years back. He had been on the point of investing his few remaining thousands in silver mines at the instigation of an unworthy friend. Her ladyship had always suspected this Pythias, and, having somehow got wind of the proceeding, rushed to town after her lord in time to meet him at his lawyer's, and inform him of the bubble nature of the concern in which he was about to embark.

Lord Wrexham was never sufficiently grateful for being compelled to cut his friend and save his money. When at the present time Laura insisted on Tom's mad infatuation for Miss McCracken,

the earl was disposed to pooh-pooh the matter as an invention of his wife's fancy. The more he threw derision on the motion, the more sure was the countess of the serious nature of the business. Was she not observant? Were her intuitions ever at fault? Had Wrexham *no* experience of her penetration? No, no; she was not to be taken in by any assumption of indifference on Tom's part. If there was nothing in it, why was he always hanging about Lakenham? Dick had told her that he either rode or drove through that village every day. What did that mean? And hadn't he been skating there constantly ever since the frost began?

Somehow or other, during her sojourn at Ellesmore Lodge, Miss Godbold had got wind of the wordy argument between this noble pair. It was probably his young lordship who let in light. This pre-

cocious little boy highly esteemed Miss Dorothea as a "game one," and was not backward in his protestations of regard. On occasions this wonderful old dame did something very like swearing. Moreover, she had been most kind to him when he was laid up in a dull Scotch castle with a periodical attack of bronchitis. And this wheezing little jockey, hoarse as any book-maker, had in return instructed her in horseflesh and other matters wherein he was an adept. One morning he came in, odoriferous of the stables, to find Miss Godbold alone in the breakfast-room.

"There's ma late again; and I don't wonder! She was talking to the governor about Uncle Tom before I went out, and she's at it still. Why shouldn't he make a sheep's-eye at a girl if he likes it? Peter he winks at all the barmaids in Oldford, and that's worse, ain't it? There's one there that's stunning! My word, she has

got a lovely pink colour, and eyes like sloes, and black lines under them. I say, Miss Godbold, what would she think if I made a sheep's-eye at her? I mean to wink at her when I grow up, and put my arm round her neck, and call her 'my dovey.' I know Peter does it."

The old lady was keenly alive to crumbs of scandal or information dropped in her presence, but the history of Peter's amorous inclinations was not interesting. She returned to Ellesmore's text.

"Oh, then Uncle Tom is a susceptible gentleman?"

The boy looked cautiously over his shoulder, then lifted both hands to his mouth and sheltered a whisper behind them.

"I don't know what that means, but I can tell you ma is on the wrong scent. Yesterday, when I was skating, Uncle Tom looked fit to burst himself with rage

because the old biscuit-man was talking to a tall girl with eyes as big as saucers -the sort of eyes you seem to see right through. They look like my colley's did when I drowned her pups—as though she wanted to cry and couldn't. I say, Miss Godbold, I don't like that look. Now, there's Miss McCracken—she's the artful hussy—she's a nice sort, and she wears pa's racing colours, black and red. She's downright jolly. That's *my* sort. Peter he likes a girl full of 'go' too."

Thus it came to pass that Miss Godbold went home with a notion that Tom Ringrose was looking tenderly towards her niece; also, that Mr. McCracken did not shame to dance attendance openly upon her.

Tom called at the Lodge a couple of days before the ball. The idol still prevailed against him, in spite of his iconoclasm. He had not succeeded in breaking the image.

"I say, old fellow, you look hipped. Are you going to have the jaundice? What's amiss?" said Lord Wrexham.

Now, Tom was always bilious of hue, so this brotherly amenity counted for nothing. This was in the privacy of the smoking-room, where Tom had found his lordship poring over a racing calendar.

"Deuce take you, Wrexham! Can't you let a man alone? It isn't every one can show a dairy-maid complexion like you. It's this beastly weather."

But the earl would not let him off easily.

"Laura says you're in love. Surely you ain't such a fool again," he said solemnly. The whole family was at one to constrain Tom's affections, it seemed. "I can't say I was ever much that way myself, but, bless you, I know the colour of it in another man! Your meat and drink ain't good enough, the weather is all wrong, and you think you'll travel for a

bit—in the wilds, of course—civilization is all rot!—eh, old boy?"

Tom moved uneasily. He had, as he thought, carefully guarded his secret. He declined a cigar as a dangerous seduction to confidences. The earl went on—

"Now, it is *not* that McCracken girl, I'll stake my life, whatever they say." Tom shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "I watched you the other night, for the sake of the family, as Laura has it. Not that Miss McCracken is amiss, and I hear she'll have a pretty penny. I say, Tom, you haven't got into another mess, I hope?" said Lord Wrexham apprehensively.

At this moment the door was thrown open by a resolute hand, and in bounced Laura in garden gloves and apron, waving a trowel in one hand. She had been doing some amateur work in the tumbledown greenhouse, and her shabby velveteen gown was daubed with whitewash.

"Upon my word, this is *too* bad! Nobody ever told me you were here, Tom. Why didn't you send for me?" she began in tones that were not conciliatory. "You'd have been gone before Wrexham would take the trouble to let me know. What *is* the matter, Tom? You look as if you'd come from a funeral!"

Tom was not in a mood to endure comments of this sort.

"Matter?—matter enough when you go meddling in other people's affairs, and setting my mother preaching with your infernal warnings! You'd better mind your own business till you're asked to interfere. I'll stand no more of it, Laura; I'll be off to Patagonia!"

Her ladyship sat down and took off her gloves in a preparatory way. This violence on Tom's part had not been unpremeditated. He had come in an evil mood to the Lodge, determined to speak his mind to Laura.

Her aggressive opening gave him an excellent opportunity for his assault.

"I should like to know where you would have been now if I hadn't pulled you out of the ditch?" said the lady, gathering breath and spirit.

"Oh, you're precious fond of throwing up that old story! As if no other man had ever been caged in the same way. I dare say I should have found a road out of the matrimonial noose without your assistance. The Lord knows I wish I had! I'm sick of being reminded of your services."

Her ladyship began to moderate her tone. "Tom, it's all for your own good," she remonstrated. "You're going to make a fool of yourself again. I don't say this is quite as bad; but the Ringroses have a right to expect something better than a tradesman's daughter at the Abbey. Do you mean to marry Miss McCracken?

It's as clear as the nose on your face that you're in love."

Tom's nose was large and not shapely. Oh, she was vulgar, no doubt, at times in her address, especially if her temper got the better of her!

Tom rose, giving himself a shake, as though to cast the dust of this house from off him. He looked solemnly at Laura, before taking up his hat.

"That may be," he said slowly; "but you've saddled the wrong horse this time, Laura."

So thoroughly surprised was she by this admission that she suffered him to leave the room without any further word of farewell. This was getting a very serious matter indeed, and, pondering over it after she had resumed her work in the greenhouse, Laura was of opinion that she had pushed Tom too far. And could it be possible that there was any significant

meaning in what he had said? He had signified there was an attachment, though not where she suspected. Pooh! he was trying to throw dust in her eyes. As if any one could be deceived after hearing of these constant visits to Lakenham. Tom was no diplomatist, it was certain. Besides, he had not been absent from home for months, and there was not one girl in the neighbourhood that he would ever look at.

Arabella Proteus? No, impossible; she was too fat and too red, as well as too ready. Mabel Bragge? A chattering simpleton who talked a man's head off. One by one she reviewed maids and widows. None would meet the case.

Tom Ringrose was not the only knight who wore his heart upon his sleeve at this juncture. Cupid had been showering his arrows abroad at Lakenham with no consideration for rank or respect for age.

Said Rachel, on the same afternoon as

the Ellesmore episode, coming suddenly into the drawing-room, and finding her papa seated on the music-stool, with a sentimental gaze fixed on the decorated ceiling—

"Are you thinking of taking music-lessons, papa?"

He started with an evident sense of guilt. He had seen Rachel set off for a ride ten minutes before.

"I dare say that Miss Longstaffe would be charmed to give you lessons; or perhaps Miss Pilkington might be persuaded to take you into the choir. How well you would look in a little white surplice!"

This flippant impertinence was past all endurance. However, Rachel very well knew that for the moment she had the best of the situation. Various matters had gone wrong recently, and she was minded to make Mr. McCracken suffer. Besides, he had not treated her so well in the

matter of Sir Bruce, to whom he still alluded as a husband who had slipped through her fingers. Now, no young lady of ambitious views cares to be reminded of such failures, though, to do Rachel justice, it had only been a half-hearted attempt on her part to secure the baronet. She was fully aware that he had fathomed her manœuvres and that he had weighed her in a very accurate scale. A husband to whom his wife's motives would be altogether transparent, did not quite meet with this young lady's approval. She might travel further and fare better. Nevertheless, she was not going to let her father off on this occasion, when a glorious opportunity presented itself.

Mr. McCracken grew red to the roots of his hair at his daughter's address, and shut down the piano lid with a decided bang.

"I thought you had gone for a ride, my dear," he began urbanely. "I was

merely trying this instrument. I don't think it is quite first-class. Not mellow—decidedly not mellow. People of judgment would prefer a Broadwood."

Mr. McCracken had recently heard Medea mention her predilection for Broadwood's instruments. Rachel smiled with bitter sweetness.

"You could hardly expect my horse to turn lame half a mile away from home, and I certainly did not expect to find you musically-minded five minutes after my departure."

Mr. McCracken twisted round on the music-stool and faced her. She was studying the monogram on her whip end.

"By the way, Rachel, I'm thinking of building a music-room. This apartment is much too low. Sir Bruce was quite of my opinion. It will be worth my while with such a long lease. The expense will not be very great."

Rachel raised her eyebrows significantly. "Really now, papa, a music-room? Is Sir Bruce coming down to superintend the building of it? It will be very nice, of course. And every one will know that it isn't for *you*, and it isn't for *me*, and we shan't be accused of vanity and wishing to air our *own* performances. How you will cultivate taste in Flatshire! Shall we give a concert and have all the opera singers down? How delightful!"

She watched him narrowly as she clapped her hands in affected delight. Mr. McCracken twisted uneasily on the stool.

"I didn't say anything to the baronet about *superintending*. I don't doubt we can get on very well without him."

Rachel frowned a little, affecting to muse awhile. She was well aware that her parent was watching her cogitations with a suspicious eye. At last she went

to the window, and from the recess spoke with more than customary plaintiveness.

"Papa, isn't it very expensive work for middle-aged people to make love? You see, nothing sentimental suits them exactly. Flowers and endearments don't do, you know. Writing poetry and languishing looks seem foolish for those who are getting on in years. But it seems hard lines that they should require to build music-rooms."

She shook her head distressfully and went out of the room through the conservatory. There her face broke out in smiles. As for Mr. McCracken, he was beside himself with rage. He had made himself absurd in her sight, and knew it.

"Confound the hussy!" he muttered, recalling his own sentimental attitude. In seclusion, surely a man was privileged

to wear his heart on his sleeve, or on his face if he chose.

But there was a yet nobler heart than Mr. McCracken's tortured by sundry daws of a spiteful and critical disposition.

Miss Pilkington, coming to call on Mrs. Morgan, had her uncharitable little say concerning Medea's reprehensible way of looking at mankind. She mocked incessantly at the girl's simplicity, at her unsophisticated manners and candid speech, with an artful knowledge of the mother's mind. To be singular and unlike others was a deadly crime in Mrs. Morgan's sight. In time all these things came to Medea's ears, and the poor soul was harassed with the heinousness of her own candour at one moment, and the next chidden for her reserves. Apollo also did his best to vex Medea's mind at this time. He had visited unkindly upon her her unwilling-

ness to respond to invitations from the Hall. She was selfish, engrossed in her pursuits; or she thought no one was clever enough to talk to her, and so on. Small matters these, it may be; but as they went on varying from day to day Medea was oppressed with the sense of failure. How was it she could not fit herself to the groove of her own family? After Sir Bruce's departure she was more ready to meet Miss McCracken's advances, though even these meetings in a short time became disagreeable. Somehow or other Mr. McCracken always intruded himself at all interviews.

It must be admitted that Rachel was equal to inventing pretexts to throw herself in Apollo's way. Her father's predilection for Medea's society caused her no alarm. Why should it? It might keep that young lady out of harm's way, which, being interpreted, signified the

way of Tom Ringrose or other eligible admirers. Concerning Sir Bruce Onslow Miss McCracken puzzled herself considerably. Medea's behaviour towards him had certainly not denoted any wish to attract. That chapter was evidently finished, however romantic it might have been. Rachel decided in her own mind that she would have no very great objection to Medea as a step-mother. She was attractive and refined, and not likely to press her authority unduly. Certainly the case might have been worse. Meanwhile, she thought she would make some sort of hay while the sun was shining, and continued to amuse herself diligently with Apollo, who no longer bore the semblance of a crushed worm. His belief in his own luck had come back to him since Rachel had thrown fresh spells about him; for she appeared very anxious to please him when Mr. McCracken was not present. Thus

the days of this young man's extended leave flew by rapidly. In vain did poor little Letty curl her limp feathers and shed sorrowful tears over *Myra's Journal of Fashion.*

CHAPTER III.

JOVE LAUGHS.

Lovers' perjuries are likely to afford the cynical gods matter of merriment for all time to come, I fancy. When Mr. Tom Ringrose vowed that he had never known what it was to love before, and that the world contained no equal to Medea, the divinities which preside in the courts of Love may have recorded some false swearing against him. But such offences are easily condoned, and bear no heavy weight of punishment. Alas! where would the majority be if made to pay serious penalties for changes of affection? Amatory transfers are drawn out daily,

and blotted out subsequently with covert laughter. Erato, sweet nymph, who is given to straying from the solitary glades round about Parnassus, loving neither meditation nor silence, is ever ready to smile at a new invocation. What matter if the same hearts are dished up anew?—it is so much grist to her mill! No doubt she cuts jokes with Cupid concerning young men's foolishness, as she watches him bend his bow; but she twangs away with no less animation at a new string to her own lute, and stretches out a hand to receive a fresher crown with undiminished pleasure.

Poor old Jove sometimes, perchance, shakes his head for the sake of Olympian morals, such as they are, but winks at Venus while he addresses Diana, who is looking very much aghast.

"'If men were constant he were perfect'—hey, Diana? Ah, how that wicked world is given to lying!"

Sweet critic, I admit the impropriety of Jove quoting Shakespeare!

A week of frost had done incalculable mischief at Lakenham. Not only had the skating thrown young people into daily contact, but the Bedmonstone ball had given a further impetus to love-making. This entertainment had come off with great *éclat*, and Lady Wrexham's pluck had received due meed of praise. The Proteus faction had seceded at the eleventh hour from its ancient faith, no longer acknowledging the sovereign sway of Ringrose Abbey.

It is true there had been a tale of accidents on the homeward way, owing to the absent moon. The Nichol chariot had landed young Donald, his mamma, and a Glasgow young lady visiting them, in a deep ditch. The lassie, who was by no means "mim," had flung her arms round Donald's neck in frantic alarm, from which

affectionate embrace she refused to release him when rescued by the footman. Mr. Brown met with a catastrophe of a similar nature, his horse manifesting a clear desire under the cover of darkness to return to its native fields.

Some of the idols, evilly entreated in a previous chapter, had been patched and set up again on loftier altars, being finally worshipped more fondly than before. The fair images, knowing nothing of their temporary abasement, smiled in ignorance upon those who had lavished contumely upon them.

Since the ball, Tom Ringrose was reduced to yet more abject submission. Up to the very day of it he swore he would not go. Catch him ever befriending Laura! He drove off to Bedmondstone on that morning in something like a blaspheming mood. He cursed his valet, his groom, and his horse, before

leaving home. He execrated the road, the frost, and everything his eye rested on by the way. Arrived at the town, he did not cease his revilings. His lunch at the club was cold; there was nothing whatever in the papers, no one in the streets, not a fellow even to play billiards with. It was a cursed dull hole, and he would go home again at once; by way of Lakenham, perhaps—over the village green, under the doctor's wicket-gate, it might be!

However, he might as well run his eye down the list of ball-goers to-night. What a ridiculous idea it was of Laura's to get up a ball! Of course there would be none but the townspeople there. Tom took himself off to the Guildhall in irritable mood, and peremptorily called for the list. "Lady Wrexham and party" at the head, of course. Yes; he very well knew who the party was. The Danby-Chokeby's, a pair of giraffe-like girls, who always seemed

to be nibbling at the top of a fellow's head. What a misfortune for women to be nearly six foot high! Then there would be Lord Wrexham's cousins, of course, four of the Marindens, loud-laughing, horsey young men and women, who would bring out betting-books instead of programmes. Certainly he had no intention of tackling that party. Let Laura find partners for her girls as she best could. Bragges, four tickets; Nichols and party; Brown, one; and, good heavens! the Proteus lot, five of them. Laura had worked to some purpose. What would his lady mother say to this secession? Tom paused with his finger on the next ones. A very perturbed expression crossed his face. Mr. and Miss McCracken and party, *four!*

Tom had been at Lakenham Hall as late as yesterday, and had received no intimation of any expected guests. Was it possible that Medea Longstaffe had been

prevailed upon to come with them? This was the only explanation that offered itself. It was decidedly a suspicious number—four. These would be two McCrackens and two Longstaffes. Immediately Mr. Tom Ringrose dropped his imperative and cursing mood, thanked the clerk suavely, and marched back to the club with a thoughtful mien. He did go, of course, to the ball. Dick found him that evening, after dinner, in the smoking-room, trying on lavender gloves.

"I suppose I shall have to show up to-night, old man. It seems a shame for us not to stand by Laura."

The result was a fresh forging of fetters. He might have ridden safely after Flatshire hounds the whole of the season without losing his heart, but a week's enforced inaction had developed a passion which he believed eternal. I do not wish you to mock at Tom, though he was reduced to a

state of crazy dejection; for it was a good honest love, sounder than most in these days, and coloured with the durable dye of respect.

On the second day after the ball Medea went to skate with Apollo, as usual. When the dusk was falling and she was preparing to go home, Tom offered his escort across the park; for Apollo had deserted her, making Miss McCracken's injured ankle an excuse to run up to the Hall. This young lady had sprained it on the previous day. It fell to Medea's lot to maintain conversation. Of late Tom's loquacious moods alternated with long periods of brooding silence. The spring of his oratory was dried up. The first phase of his love—the desire to please—was over. Now had ensued despair and a sense of his own unworthiness. He had arrived at the stage of trembling in the presence of his beloved. A good sign this, young

gentlemen, let me tell you, arguing quite as much virtue for yourselves as for the maiden you fancy.

It is often said that women prefer bold wooers. Perhaps the more ordinary class does. But do any of you chance to remember how Francesca tells the tale of Paolo's love—most exquisite passage, ending, "La bocca mi baciò, tutto tremante"?

Alas, for poor Tom! he could not even *look* steadily at Medea. And she, really liking the man who was so diffident in his approaches, found his new gravity suited her. And at the ball he had come so opportunely between her and Mr. McCracken's attentions, which began to be odious to her. If Mr. Ringrose accompanied her round the lake, skating, she was not taxed with any effort to keep pace with funny remarks, or to ward off disagreeable compliments. He appeared actually to retrogress in familiarity as he knew her better.

But every evening this young man had driven home weighing her merits more seriously, and considering less what other people would have to say. If he proposed to Miss Longstaffe and she accepted him, there would, of course, be the devil to pay, opposition to encounter in every direction. Lady Wrexham would interfere, and all the family would put wits together to prevent such an alliance. When he was in more hopeful mood, Tom chuckled regarding the surprise that would come upon them all. No one had an inkling of this affair, he was quite sure. Their eyes had been steadily fixed in another direction, seeing things that never were to be seen. But still in a state of incertitude regarding Medea's opinion of him, Tom's thoughts did not travel far in the direction of interference. He only cast an angry thought towards Laura, and swore that if she opposed him he would cut the whole lot of

his relations. The Ringrose property was strictly entailed, and be hanged if he wouldn't raise money somehow if they pushed him in a corner!

For the first time in his life the young man felt humbly regarding his own recommendations to the female mind. *She* was so deuced clever, and withal so beautiful and calm beneath his notice. No flutterings or nervousness ever betrayed her to be as other women were concerning the attentions of young men. He might flourish his Sultanic handkerchief towards her with ever such decisive intention, without moving her in the least. Tom was not at all sure of the ground he stood on, or if Medea ever for a moment contemplated him in the light of a suitor. He had never yet got beyond commonplace conversation with her, and found great difficulty in approaching sentiment in this case. Those large eyes might

turn with mystified inquiry, or even anger, upon him. Naturally his demeanour betrayed hesitation and embarrassment. This discipline was not at all unfavourable to Tom's manners, which had hitherto exhibited the assurance of a three-tailed bashaw. Bashfulness had never been laid to his charge.

Medea stepped out quickly over the hard frozen snow on the road. Her companion had recommended the highway as easier to traverse than the untrodden track over the park. The air was so still that the railway whistle at Bedmonstone was quite audible. The beautiful glow of a winter sunset lingered on the horizon. Every twig of the leafless trees was outlined in the delicate tracery of rime.

"The sky looks pretty, doesn't it?" said Tom, after a prolonged silence. He was losing a golden opportunity and felt desperate. Should he throw for his stake now?

Medea was quite astonished that this young man should observe nature.

"Yes, very," she said, quickly responsive. "We shall have another bright day to-morrow. Look at the red glow. This long frost reminds me of a German winter."

He did not lift his eyes to the sky at her bidding.

"I suppose we shall not meet so often when the frost breaks up?" he said moodily, jangling Medea's skates together.

"No, I do not suppose so. But you will be glad to have some hunting again. And this, you know, has been a very idle time for me. I have not had so much leisure for years," she said, smiling.

"What can there be for you to do?" he said resentfully. "*I* never can kill time."

She laughed. "Ah, you see, I am one of those fortunate beings who was not sent into the world a drone. I should

get into mischief if I had no occupation and lived on others' honey."

Tom wondered if it was his idle life that had led him towards Leonora and such-like harpies.

"Oh, ah—yes. I see, you like to be busy. Improving the shining hours and all that sort of thing. Now, I suppose a couple of pianos, a library full of books, and a big house to look after would keep you going. It really is astonishing what occupation a woman finds in a house. Now, making antimacassars and arranging flowers could never make a man happy."

Tom was staring at the ground as he spoke, wondering how he could work up to his subject. Medea laughed again a little at this graphic description of a lady's housewifely duties.

"Oh, I dare say the pianos and the books might satisfy me if nothing better offered itself. But my idea of a busy life

was rather different. Such things as you speak of would only be for my own pleasure. I should like better to help other people. Do not think me wicked if I confess I often envy rich people their power. There are so many things one cannot do without money. When I was a little girl I used always to be dreaming about being famous. And I tried hard to excel in everything. I made a great mistake, and my life seems all to have been wasted in fruitless endeavours. You will be amused, Mr. Ringrose, if I tell you what I should do if I was a rich person."

Medea paused a moment, and Tom said he would like very much to hear.

"If I had money I should like to build better homes for poor people either in town or country. I should try and make them more healthy and less contented with dirt and bad ventilation. It is a mistake to think that the poor are always discon-

tented. There are some things they accept as a matter of course, and in country places they go on bearing, in a philosophical way, a great deal they need not to bear."

It was well for Medea that Apollo was not present at this moment. Her enthusiasm and earnestness was manifest in her beaming eyes. Tom's face cleared a little.

"But those things you would like to do are not out of your reach, Miss Longstaffe. You speak as though they were beyond you."

He ventured to raise a deprecating glance to her face. Medea opened her eyes widely while she laughed—a laugh with a delicious ripple of doubt and mockery.

"But, oh, Mr. Ringrose, they are likely to be for ever beyond me. Why, do you know I have never had more than fifty pounds a year of my own to spend?"

He thought of his cigar bills. "You

might marry a rich man," he said at last in a low voice, trembling at his own temerity, "and then you could do the things you speak of."

A little pause, during which Medea looked away from him. Had he offended her?

"That is not at all likely," she said quietly—so quietly that Tom was thrown off his guard. She had not seemed angry at the hint.

"There is more than *one*—ready to ask you," he said in thick tones, as if he were suffocating.

"I should not marry any one I did not care for," said Medea coldly, quickening her pace without knowing it, as we do in moments of agitation.

But Tom was now fairly embarked. "Miss Longstaffe——" he began solemnly.

Suddenly the girl saw what was before her. There was no mistaking the entreaty

in his voice, after the words gone before. She had never regarded Tom as a possible lover. Their intercourse had been unrestrained and prosaic, and Medea's thoughts were never much bent in this direction.

"Miss Longstaffe," adjured Tom, now swinging the skates desperately, "if—if I could make you believe that I care for you —*love* you—would you?"

Medea halted suddenly. They were close to a wood now. Through this little copse a short cut led to the village green, but it was a path not much made use of, except by labourers who passed to and fro in the early morning and at evening.

Now the red bar in the west had faded to a thin streak of gold, and the shades of the winter night were gathering quickly about the pair. Still it was light enough for Tom to read the expression of his companion's face. Her agitation was very evident as she essayed to check his speech.

"Oh no—no, do not say it! I am so sorry—oh, so sorry! What can I say besides? I have been blind to it all. Mr. Ringrose, believe me, I never thought of *this*."

For once Tom Ringrose believed a woman's word. He went on with renewed courage—

"But why should you not think of it? 'Pon my soul, I've never met a girl in my life that I admire and—er—respect as I do you! You make a man feel as if he could be a better sort if you took him in hand, 'pon my life you do!"

There was a slight break in Tom's voice; he really felt his words.

"And you mean that you wish me to *marry* you—really and truly?" said Medea in strangely bewildered tones.

The young man answered, with an angry gesture—

"God bless me! What else, Miss Long-

staffe? Do you take me for a blackguard, to dare to talk to you of love with no serious meaning? Do you think I would insult you?"

Then Medea recalled another who had dared to talk of love, and whose respect had not caused him to refrain from fond assurances of worship. She fell to sudden weeping, her sobs shaking her tall form violently. It was unaccountable to Tom; he felt sure that he had been rude and rough.

"Don't cry—don't, Miss Longstaffe. Good heavens, you must know I wouldn't for the world make you unhappy! Most women like to be loved. Can't you see I adore you, and that I've been making an infernal fool of myself for the past three weeks—ever since I first met you at the McCrackens' dance? By Jove, any other girl would have seen it in a trice! And don't you be thinking that I'm a man who

hasn't seen much of the world! I'm an eldest son, and have been a pretty good target for young ladies all my life. I know my own mind now if ever any man did. I've kicked about pretty well in my time—in all sorts of society—and I know the stuff most women are made of. Not that I'm comparing *you* to the rank and file. Let them all say what they like; I've a right to choose a wife to please myself, and what's more, I mean to! I say, Miss Longstaffe, can't you throw a fellow a kind word? May I take your hand? Good God! my darling, don't cry like that! What have I said or done? My dear—my dear! Why, you are the only girl I've never been sure I could have for the asking! I don't think you understand me. I ain't a bad sort, I do assure you. Ask Wrexham, if you like; he knows better than the rest."

Tom's incoherent remarks were poured forth fervently. By this time Medea's

sudden emotion had well-nigh spent itself. At his desperate appeal she raised her eyes, still wet with tears. He kept at a distance from her; but his ugly, sallow face was full of agitation, and his voice was hoarse and uncertain. He had dropped the skates, and stood with one shoulder against a tree. It was impossible to doubt Medea's meaning when she looked at him; her gaze was so sad and spiritless. He knew his fate before she opened her lips.

"It always seems, Mr. Ringrose, that I bring trouble to people who have anything to do with me. Since I first met you I always thought you were very kind; but if I had ever imagined that you meant anything more than kindness—I—I might have made you understand that it would be no use at all. It never will be any good for any man to care for me in that way. I have no thought of marriage."

Tom suddenly felt a check. He took his

defeat manfully; but when he spoke again there was a flavour of bitterness in his words.

"I might have known I was not good enough for you. I suppose you mean, Miss Longstaffe, that you do not care a brass farthing for me? Don't mind saying it. I don't accuse you of leading me on—you never did; but still, you seemed not to mind me being near to you and talking."

Then Medea said urgently, "I cannot care for you in *that* way, Mr. Ringrose."

"But you might get to care for a fellow if you knew he wasn't really a bad sort. I will wait—months—years," said Tom, plucking up heart for a moment.

"I cannot—oh no, I cannot!" she said with less composure, looking wildly about her. "Why should I live to make others miserable? I entreat you not to speak to me of this any more. Believe me, I shall never marry."

Then Tom Ringrose thought more than ever that Medea was not as other women are. What one that he knew would hesitate to accept ten thousand a year and a leading position in the county?

Meanwhile, in the conservatory at the Hall, another tender scene was being enacted, in which Apollo took a chief part. Rachel, enveloped in a cashmere shawl, with an influenza cold reddening her eyelids and the tip of her nose, was not prepared to receive visitors on this special afternoon. The injured ankle of the previous day had been a convenient pretext for a temporary seclusion. In reality, there was very small necessity for her to limp across the room, and the unbecoming cold alone accounted for her absence from the lake. Nevertheless, when in the twilight a bold young soldier was ushered into the drawing-room, Rachel was not altogether displeased. The afternoon had been dull

and tedious, and Mudie's book-box had nothing entertaining this week.

On Apollo's arrival the lamps were brought, and Rachel thought there was too much light.

"Come into the conservatory," she said. "I promised your sister some camellias." Still, she forgot the scissors, and having reached her haven she dropped herself into a low basket chair in the warm-scented corner, where a Turkey rug was spread.

The light from the drawing-room lamps was well subdued here, and Rachel hoped her nose was less visibly tinged with colour. She looked very pretty with her golden head framed in the dark background of glossy camellia leaves.

"My leave is up in two days," said the man, with a sort of resentment, as he rubbed a leaf of scented verbena in his hand. He had dropped into a chair very

close to Rachel's, after finding a footstool for the infirm ankle to rest on.

"Oh, what a pity! But, you know, the best of friends must part. Our charming circle is breaking up." She lifted her eyebrows with pretty despair.

"We are ordered to the Cape," he said with emphasis.

"Indeed! How delightful for you! You will be in the thick of the fight. 'Go where glory waits thee,'" she answered, with perverse hilarity in her manner.

"Why not finish that verse?" he rejoined quickly, bending forward and looking into her eyes.

Again she arched her eyebrows. "With the greatest pleasure. Let me see if I can remember.

> "Go where glory waits thee;
> But while fame elates thee,
> Oh, remem——"

She drew a sudden breath, with a pretty, mocking smile. She had not quite committed herself.

"Shall I?" he said, bending still nearer, his handsome face aglow, his words almost a whisper.

"Shall you what?" she said coyly, playing with the fringe of her shawl.

"Remember you. I will do anything you bid me." His words fell softly on her ears.

Oh, Apollo, if you could but have known how Rachel's heart was beating! She wished—how very much she wished!—that he were neither so good-looking, nor so poor, nor yet so desperately in earnest.

"As if you could help it!" she said in a playful way.

Now, Apollo was nobly endowed with self-reliance, or, perhaps, if you do not like him, you may prefer to call it impudence.

His audacity was really quite superb, qualifying him a true son of Mars. He believed himself deeply in love with Rachel, and, still worse, calculated that he had found favour in her sight. She had smiled more frequently upon him lately than even upon the heir to Ringrose Abbey. Apollo did not suspect any artful playing off of himself to attract bigger game. Rachel could not be experienced in the tactics of veteran flirts. Such candid artlessness could never, surely, conceal a scheming disposition. On the strength of a familiar acquaintance with garrison hacks, Apollo set himself up as an authority in things feminine.

A young man with only fifty pounds a year, in addition to his pay, must needs be a bold wooer. No sense of his own deservings handicapped him here. If Hope had been uppermost in Pandora's box it is very certain we poor mortals should have been

less blest. Even now, with a wretched humanity clinging frantically to her skirts, she is able to soar into an empyrean where the gravity of common sense is lost.

Apollo, who relied habitually on what he called his luck, otherwise who was peculiarly hopeful of disposition, thought that Miss McCracken favoured his advances. He had that confidence in himself which frequently ensures success.

"No, of course I could not help remembering you," he said, with a long-drawn sigh, stealing his arm round the back of her chair.

She leant forward.

"Miss McCracken—Rachel—darling—when I come back from the Cape—if they don't put a bullet through me—will you be *kind* to me?"

Something more than the tip of Rachel's nose was rosy-red now.

"Am I not always kind?" she said

weakly, with a vain effort to appear not to understand.

He sighed again, like a furnace. The arm on the chair-back fell down to her waist—not casually at all. She started.

"You know what I mean now, Rachel. I want you to like me—to *love* me—you darling! I want you not to forget me while I am away. Will you be true to me till I come back and am able to ask you to be mine?"

Rachel drew herself away with discreet maidenly dignity. The strictest of duennas would have been satisfied with her modest mien, her stammering speech.

"Oh, Mr. Longstaffe—oh, I did not understand—at all! I am so very stupid, you know. You—you want me to make a promise—to bind myself secretly to you—to—a—a sort of engagement. Oh no—I really couldn't—you know, it would be dreadfully wrong!"

After a week of most desperate flirting her scruples woke to life with surprising vigour.

"Then you have been fooling me all along, and I have made a great mistake! You do not care for me at all, I suppose?"

He drew away suddenly, burying his face in his hands, in an attitude of utter despair.

In this posture of abject dejection Rachel looked towards him. The sight of his comely head bent against the back of his chair touched her heart, or that little part of her which represented it. Could it really be that this fair head was dear to her? An hour ago she would have said not.

Suddenly the thought of a battle-field and all its bloody horrors forced itself upon her. The news of Isandula had come last night. Those bright, golden curls lying low, while the bold blue eyes

turned sightless to the stars of the southern hemisphere, was the vision her fancy conjured up in a moment. It was a wave of sentiment, the nearest thing to tenderness that Rachel knew.

Why not send him away happy? No one would be the wiser. For one short, blissful half-hour why not throw prudence and ambition to the wind? I make no allowances, no explanations, on Rachel's part; she was culpable in the extreme. But such sins are committed every day. Perhaps her calculating brain stood still a space.

She stretched out one hand timidly; he did not take it. She inclined towards him; he did not move. She sighed heavily; no response. Then, with a little preparatory sob, she said—

"But—I—I *do* care for you. If I thought it would really make you happy, I would promise to remember you when you

are away. I might even promise to love —oh—oh, don't!" Rachel's head was on his shoulder now. "Please, please let me go—some one may come. Very well, I will say it once—only once. Yes, Apollo, you dear, dear boy—I do love you!"

CHAPTER IV.

SQUARING HER CIRCLE.

April entered slowly and gently this year, carrying with her no recollection of wild March. At her coming soft rains fell and the air was very still. In a few days she smiled, and at the parting of the clouds and the warm embrace of the sun, an abundance of flowers spread in the woods and fields. But there were none at Lakenham Hall to look on the spring glories of copses and shrubberies. The McCrackens had taken their departure for London before Easter, and the big house was shut up awhile.

But the doctor's garden was gayer this

spring-time than ever before, and the passers-by would pause at the wicket-gate to admire as they crossed the Green. There was a border aflame with laggard daffodils which had been coy in March, and bright hepatica made brilliant patches of colour here and there. Philomela, the gardener-in-chief, was radiant with pride as she surveyed her little territory. Her only sorrow was that Medea could not be there to admire and appreciate. Phil, who had spent most of her life at Lakenham, was quite sure that nowhere else were the flowers so beautiful.

Flora, in spite of her name, was but a poor substitute for Medea when the admiration of nature was in question. Medea would stand quite still, with her beaming eyes full of wonder and pleasure at the earth's fairness on a sunny day. The gladness of spring-time would be reflected on her face, and the ecstasy of a poetic

nature face to face with the renewal of life would betray itself in her words. But Flora would cast a careless glance and pass on, or run to fetch a sunshade lest her complexion should be spoilt. *She* admired most bouquets of wired exotics, and had cardboard boxes full of artificial blooms which she vowed were *ravissantes* when fixed in her little bonnets. All her conversation was interlarded with French expressions. Phil had a large scorn for her young sister's corrupt taste.

Flora had come home at last, after two years' absence, "for good and all," as she informed Miss Pilkington, drawing up her slight figure in a would-be dignified way.

"Dear, dear! only to think that you have finished your education! Young people are emancipated at a very early age nowadays."

Flora, always a spoilt child, was still

inclined to pertness. Olivia's patronage was not at all agreeable to her.

"Oh, but that was a very long time ago, Miss Pilkington! Fashions have changed a good deal. I am past seventeen, and am quite grown up. Julie Delacour, who was at school with me, is six months younger, and she was married last week. I was bridesmaid, and we had the loveliest dresses."

Hereupon Flora stood up to catch a glimpse of herself in a mirror. She never missed an opportunity of worshipping her own image.

"Mamma was only saying yesterday, Miss Pilkington, that you nursed me on your knee when I was a baby. Now, did you, really?"

Miss Flora put her little head on one side, like a bird investigating some object foreign to its experience, as she surveyed the flower-encircled hat which crowned

Olivia's head. It really was excessively juvenile, and did not warrant Mrs. Morgan's assertion. In honour of the spring season, Olivia's headpiece was decorated profusely with cheap violets and primroses. Poor Olivia! In vain she cherished the tradition of her youth, and strove not to be left behind in the race for fashion. It might well slip from her grasp with the youngest of the Longstaffe family testifying to years come and gone!

"Some people have very good memories for what concerns their friends," she said snappishly.

The pretty Parisian doll, newly arrived, with a soul full of frivolities, found life at Lakenham a very monotonous matter. After a fortnight she began to look with dismay towards a long course of years which might spread before her. She might even end her days in this out-of-

the-way corner in the vain effort to square the circle of her inclinations; for to all manner of gaieties was her little soul inclined. She knew she was made for ornament and pleasure, and the struggle to become useful and prosaic, or contented, must needs be a hard one. The more Flora looked at this ugly, commonplace life which her relations seemed to live so contentedly, the less she liked it. She had in idyllic dreams pictured herself figuring in charming scenes, *à la Watteau*. Indeed, she had purchased a lovely chintz gown in which to masquerade about the fields, with a hat, *à la bergère*, most becoming to her blooming face. But these illusions were promptly dispelled.

Living in a house on a village green, where numerous families of geese cackled and donkeys pastured, all picturesque fancies of rustic elegance were promptly dissipated. Young ideas, of course, shoot

with marvellous rapidity, but likewise the sproutings are quickly withered beneath adverse circumstances.

Flora's fond hopes of carrying all before her in a remote village faded when she perceived there was nothing to carry. She had been happy enough in this home in her childhood—how long ago it seemed!—but she had been about the world since those days, and knew there were better things. Now she sorely missed the vivacity of Paris streets, the lively conversation of her former companions, the interest of dress, theatres, Boulevards.

Philomela could not understand why her young sister should pine and grow discontented. Her own daily duties in the house, the superintendence of the store-room, the linen-closet, the garden, were all-absorbing matters. Why could not Flora be satisfied with her tasks of singing and drawing, her dainty fancy-work and letter-

writing to her "dear five hundred friends"?

But, you see, our sweet Phil always wore a serge or cotton gown, and plaited her hair but once a day. It did not matter to her that no admirer saw her from month to month. She knew nothing of the delights of shops and gay streets, with the endless distractions of a fashionable city.

Floss had certainly come home with a few illusions respecting Arcadia, having forgotten what manner of place it was. The revelation of a more enjoyable existence had been made to her, and now she could be happy here no longer. She was distractingly pretty, and knew it. Her prettiness was of an irresistible kind, and only the very few missed spirituality in her expression. Her colouring was exquisite, and the roundness of her face and figure delicious. Ejaculations of admiration had too often sounded in her ears

in the streets from the lips of vivacious and impressionable Frenchmen for Flora to remain in ignorance of her charms. Admiration delighted her little soul. She had an eager, childish longing to please and to win attention.

After two Sundays, when a half-empty church had testified to the desolation of the land, Flora began to make a murmur audibly. Mrs. Morgan, surveying the peach-blossom face and dainty dress of her youngest born, felt a certain amount of sympathy. Certainly the child had done her utmost to pass the long days. But, in spite of her industry, Flora cried out the hours had lagging feet. She turned an old black gown of Mrs. Morgan's, and, with much labour and ingenuity, made it a modish garment; and she bewitched Mary Ann Allnut with her cunning skill in trimming up her second best bonnet. She embroidered handkerchiefs, made dainty

ruffles, frizzed her hair in a hundred little curls, and, in short, resorted to every device she knew of to occupy leisure. Her airy French songs, practised till they were perfect, were sung to solitude, and her enchanting *toilettes* were aired in vain to unobserving eyes. A petulant expression of discontent began to droop her red lips.

It was certainly sad that Flora should have returned home at this dead season, when all the big houses were shut up. Even the satisfaction of looking on at other people's pleasures was denied her.

The doctor, in the beginning, did his best to amuse her, driving her hither and thither in his gig on his daily rounds. The aspect of Miss Flora, all frills and furbelows, a delicious live fashion-plate, seated in the time-honoured vehicle, outside some rural dwelling-place, occasionally

puzzled the wits of passing pedestrians; she looked so extremely out of place. Surely this pouting beauty, fair as a dream, had dropped from another sphere, out of some divinity's triumphal car!

On two consecutive market-days, Dr. Morgan—good, untiring man—took the pretty maiden to Bedmondstone; but the third time this treat was offered to her, Flora declined in uncourteous terms. What was there to see in that dull town? She had only met a rude crowd of bumpkins, staring and elbowing in the market-place, and smart young farmers, dressed in Sunday best, cracking loud and vulgar jokes across the street. She would not condescend to glance at provincial shops, turning up a scornful little nose at fashions she pronounced archaic.

"I suppose some day I shall get to look like these dreadful women," she said to herself, with a pretty disdain of aggressive

colours and silver ornaments as displayed by tradesmen's and farmers' daughters.

The Hall at Lakenham was now shut up till July, and with the advent of early swallows the Nichols had also gone north to their native city of Glasgow.

Lady Wrexham, it is true, remained in residence at Ellesmore, and Madame Ringrose, with her octogenarian consort, did not move from the Abbey.

Nevertheless, Tom Ringrose did not remain beneath the parental roof-tree. Only good, stupid Dick stayed at home to do his duty by the old couple, while the heir endangered his life abroad. No one thought the more of Dick for this, though Tom at this time was spoken of with bated breath, as of a hero. The fact was, though it was supposed to be a profound secret outside the family circle, it was not known exactly where Tom was; an element of mystery surrounding him lent another

merit to the young Ulysses. When he had gone forth he had breathed bitter words and vague threats.

It was at the end of January that he took his sudden departure, vowing that the Abbey might go to the deuce for all he cared. He solemnly declared that he would never live there, that Flatshire was a damned unpleasant county, and that Dick was free to reign in his stead, if he chose, for he never intended to return there any more.

"I'm going to America and Australia and the South Seas. I'll cut civilization and live amongst savages, and you'll none of you ever see me here again. You, mother, and Laura, between you, have driven me to it."

He looked so haggard and wild, with his white tie under his ear and his sallow face livid with passion, that they became alarmed. Neither of the ladies thus

attacked in the drawing-room, one evening after dinner, could understand what he was driven to; but, perceiving him to be in a desperate case, they had the unusual wisdom to let him alone.

"She never can have *refused* him," said Laura solemnly, thinking of Rachel. This was privately to her lord, as she recounted to him the scene that had taken place at the Abbey.

"It ain't every woman that is ready to jump down a man's throat," said his lordship, recalling how he had been captured.

"No, nor it isn't every booby that goes about with his mouth open, ready to swallow the first bait that comes," retorted her ladyship, with a rising colour.

So Tom went into exile, and had to do penance in unstarched collars and to sorrow over the scarcity of barbers in remote wildernesses. The elaborate paraphernalia of weapons with which he was supplied by

a Bond Street firm rapidly diminished in the course of his travels, but to the last he clung faithfully to a razor and sponge.

However, these big people were all beyond Flora's horizon. Mrs. Hall, Miss Dormer, and the Pilkingtons made up her little world. But even Letty had gone back to Bath to mind her seven brothers and sisters, and to think of Apollo far away, while she darned endless socks and stockings. She was very dutiful and very quiet, as maidens in her case are apt to be; for, indeed, this little creature was very sore at heart and hopeless at this time. Those well-darned knees and heels might have borne testimony to much silent weeping. Alas! the faded camellias in Letty's little shell casket were brown and dead, though she had not failed to water them nightly with sorrowful tears. Her love was kept alive by the most fragmentary fuel, for Apollo had departed cheerfully,

bidding her a joyous farewell, and promising her the trophy of an *assegai* if he did not happen to be slain by one.

A short time before Flora's return, Medea had gone on a visit to Miss Godbold at Hangerfield. No date had been fixed for her return, and it was thought in the family that their elderly relative had taken a great liking to Medea.

Miss Dorothea Godbold lived in an old-fashioned house on the other side of the county. In this house she had dwelt since her childhood, and round it were gathered innumerable associations. There was a considerable amount of land attached to this dwelling, also a few cottages, over the tenants of which Miss Dorothea exercised a tyrannical dominion. The land she farmed herself, assisted by a bailiff. Not that the bailiff's assistance ever counted for much good in her estimation.

From her girlhood Miss Godbold had

been pronounced eccentric. Thrown on her own resources at an early age by the death of her parents, her self-reliance had distinguished her at a period when a strong-minded woman was an anomaly. Had she been a degree more eccentric or somewhat richer, there is no doubt constraint would have been put upon her actions by her near relatives. However, as her peculiar theories were only put into practice on her own property, and she created no public scandal, she was regarded as harmless. Her meeting with Lady Wrexham at the house of a mutual friend in the Highlands had been quite accidental. Miss Dorothea was, however, disposed to regard it as a special intervention of Providence to bring her into contact with Charlotte's children. She had been yearning for a reconciliation for some years—in fact, ever since Nicholas died.

She at once recalled to Lady Wrexham's

mind the fact that the living of Lakenham was in the gift of her family—of her great nephew, at present—and expressed an interest in the locality she had never seen, thus diplomatically bringing about an invitation for herself.

Laura, who secretly nursed mercenary motives with regard to little Lord Ellesmore, was delighted to secure the old lady as a guest. She had administered pills and possets to the sickly little lord with so much energy that his mother felt something might come of it. She knew that Miss Godbold had quarrelled with her friends and relatives on her own side of the county. Her ladyship was in happy ignorance that she was bringing the old lady into proximity with another branch of her belongings. However, long before Miss Dorothea became acquainted with her Lakenham relatives, her testamentary intentions had been fixed. Her money, she

vowed, should never go out of the family, nor yet be squandered on hospital dinners and charity inauguration banquets. Those distant cousins were always intended to be the heirs of her savings. Not Charlotte directly, for she had shown herself perverse and stubborn in earlier years. But the folly of mating with one so unsuitable and unstable as Nicholas Longstaffe was not to be visited on her children, who might inherit the noblest qualities of Godbold faces and characters.

To Medea the change to Hangerfield came at an acceptable time. She had struggled in idleness and inaction through a dull February, and a cold despair had settled on her. In vain she sought occasion to become practical. Mrs. Jagger would not admit her to take part in any household duties.

"No, no, my lass; two on us is enough. You leave suchlike work to Miss Phil and

me. It 'ud break my heart to take the doctor's best chinay bowls to mix puddings in. There's reason in all things, and first quality brains like yours has no business amongst pots and pans."

The door of usefulness seemed actually shut in her face. Still she was resolved not to go back to books and accomplishments.

She next, at Mr. Pilkington's desire, took upon herself the burden of parish duties. Yet she never became popular as a visitor amongst the poor. She blamed herself for narrow sympathies, when, in reality, her ideality stretched the needs and yearnings of peasants far too high. The rustic mind did not grieve or vex itself in the ways she conceived. Medea's desire and endeavour to be helpful and suggestive amongst them did not meet with any favour. They did not understand her. The spiritual cravings of the hinds were

not so deep as she thought. Their vast content she had not measured fully, though she had spoken of it to Tom Ringrose. The whole creation does not travail and groan in search of something good or something better. Thus her sphere of action was checked on every side.

When the invitation to Hangerfield came to her, she was not surprised. Miss Dorothea had previously spoken of a long visit.

"And why, pray, should *you* be the one singled out?" said Mrs. Morgan, with angry resentment. "The next thing will be that you will refuse to have any decent clothes to take with you. You haven't had six-pennyworth of new ribbon even, since you came home. And bustles, Flora tells me, are coming into fashion; and you as straight as a lamp-post!"

Medea took up Miss Godbold's letter,

which Mrs. Morgan, in her irritation, had tossed aside.

"I do not think, mother, that Aunt Dorothea will care what I wear. She is old-fashioned and will not mind straight gowns. My visit must not put you to any expense. Indeed, I will not go at all if you would like me to stay here—if you think I can be of use; but there seem so few things for me to do."

Charlotte pushed her cup away hastily. "There, now; that's just like you. I suppose you call it making a sacrifice, spoiling the prospects of the family. My aunt will say it's all my fault if you refuse. Little enough you can do here—of course there is! Didn't I always say what would come of all your grand schools, and running off to Germany, and getting medals at academies, just like a man, and certificates enough to stuff a pillow, and all that rubbish? Now, of course, you don't

know how to turn your hand to anything useful, and your head is only full of things that are no good to any one; and some silly love-affair in your mind that you'll never get rid of."

This was a subject Mrs. Morgan did not dare to approach in the doctor's presence. He was now gone out on his daily rounds, and the opportunity was too good to be lost. The conviction that Medea had a secret, which was closely guarded, rankled continually in her mother's mind; for Charlotte was a true daughter of Eve, and was the sort of mother who expects her children to lay bare their very heart-throbs.

A sudden flush of indignation or pain passed over Medea's face. It had a very patient look nowadays. She only shut her lips closely, and cast her eyes down on the letter in her hand.

"Yes, it wasn't for nothing that you

came home looking like a ghost; and you to be so meek and mild now, that had the spirit and obstinacy of the whole family. Oh, I see it all!"

Charlotte lashed herself into a fury of resentment, considering the long-maintained silence and reserve on her daughter's part.

Again the colour rose to Medea's face, passing quickly away and leaving her very pale. Her lips trembled and her breath came quickly now. Philomela's quick eyes took notice of this emotion vainly restrained. To her the quiet resignation and downcast attitude of her sister spoke volumes. Passing swiftly round the breakfast-table, the dumb girl placed one hand beneath Medea's chin and lifted her bent head. A bewildering look met her keen glance of inquiry; a patient, pathetic look out of tearless eyes—but eyes so very sad. Philomela was angered to a sudden fury.

She tossed the keys which she carried on the table, and cast a glance of disdain upon her mother. Then she flew to the mantelpiece to pick up her tablets. With incredible speed, she scrawled across them—

"You bad, wicked mother, not to love your own child, and to be cruel to her! You have grieved my darling sister with unkind words. I know not what they are —I do not want to know. You would be ashamed that I should hear them. You do not deserve that I should love you at all!"

This she threw down with violence under her mother's eyes, sobbing loudly. Then she dashed out of the room to hide the tears which were streaming down her face.

Mrs. Morgan turned suddenly pale when she read the rebuke. Philomela was her idol, and she had risen in judgment against

her! This was hard, indeed; but it had not the effect of making her feel more kindly towards Medea. Our most earnest champions not infrequently leave us in a worse case than before they embraced our cause.

BOOK THE FIFTH.

CHAPTER I.

SERIO-COMIC.

Medea had been right in her supposition that Miss Dorothea would not hold strongly by fashionably cut gowns. In her own home she was certainly not one to make objection to merino frocks without flounces; for at Hangerfield this old lady folded up her rich brocades and point lace, and sent her jewels to the bank. The only part of her state that she retained here was the gold-headed stick, which she rapped more constantly in imperative moods beneath her own roof.

"I can't see any sense in wearing my best gowns on work-days; and they are

all work-days when I'm here. You'll know the real stuff I'm made of now you've come here. No idleness nor day-dreaming for me. Don't you try to masquerade about my house with company manners on. I'll soon find you out, though I'm as busy as a bee in a thyme bed. You've come here to be happy, I hope. Eh? Well, I can't say you look like a good beginning." Her sharp eyes scrutinized Medea severely. "No lovers, have you, to hanker after? Believe me, they ain't worth it. There was your mother, I remember, used always to be casting eyes at young men when she stayed here. Not that she was much of a beauty as a girl. Lord bless me, to think that you are Charlotte's daughter! And you're every inch a Godbold, and as tall as me, I declare." Medea smiled as the old lady drew herself up majestically. "Well, what are you going to do with yourself here? There's books in plenty,

musty and fusty for want of some one to use 'em; but I'm told it's a good library. There's a new piano too, which I've been fool enough to buy for you. It ain't up to the figure of McCracknell's, I dare say; but farming don't pay as well as flour pastes."

Medea was glancing about the large room with approval in her transparent eyes. Its air of quiet and refinement soothed her inexpressibly. It was a quaint drawing-room, with faded brocade hangings and yellow damask furniture of Louis Seize date. There were many curiosities, old miniatures, valuable china, and bowls of *pot-pourri* about. The wide window-seats, cushioned, were cosy corners, and through the diamond panes of the casements the glitter of crocus beds, brilliant rings of gold and purple, caught her eye. Medea rose and looked out into the garden. Long straight walks led away from the house towards a yew-clipped

hedge, beyond which a glimpse of red walls and glass houses was to be seen.

"Do you like my garden?" said Miss Dorothea as she watched Medea.

"Yes," said the girl. "I have never seen one like it before. It seems so peaceful—so sheltered."

The old lady came and looked out also, standing near Medea.

"We lived in a slow world when it was made, my dear, and you have lived where things move quicker. By-and-by you shall tell me all you have seen and felt. You shall talk to me by the hour, Medea. Good Lord, how shall I ever get used to your name?" Medea remained looking steadfastly into the silent garden, in which all the sunshine of this March day seemed prisoned. "You'll find me worth talking to, my dear, though I am an old woman. I don't repeat myself, and I don't think my young days were better than

these times. Old folks are tiresome that way. Bless you, I'm no fool, though I can't say much for my education. In my time there was no use in being born with a relish for intellectual side-dishes. They didn't give us 'em sixty years ago. Then they fed girls' minds on plain fare, I warrant you. It was all humdrum. We were just taught needlework, writing, reading, arithmetic, and housekeeping. There was no pampering us with metaphysics and art, no high feeding of accomplishments or strong meats of theology and science. I suppose our brains are much like our palates, and adapt themselves to any sort of food. God only knows I may have been born a poetess or a mathematician; but they didn't develop me at the right end. It's all one, I dare say, when you come to the end of your life if you've done your best in that state to which you are called."

Medea turned and spoke. "I do not

believe your life has been wasted, Aunt Dorothea," she said softly.

"I wasn't thinking about myself," said the old lady brusquely. "My poor child, it's you I'm thinking of. As if I didn't know that you've been choked with sawdust at Lakenham. There, come along and see your room. Bates has taken your things upstairs."

Medea had certainly not come to Hangerfield with any accurate notions of Miss Godbold's ways of thinking and acting.

When she heard her at seven o'clock in the morning railing at sluggard servants, and saw her later in the day trotting about the dairy and poultry-yard, she was certainly surprised. It was a strange sight to behold Miss Godbold standing in a farmyard, with pigs and calves clustered about her, holding lively altercation with the bailiff. She leaned upon her stick, a head crowned with a sort of triple tiara, a

much-trimmed hat surmounting her cap; but her animated gestures over sales and purchases scarcely declared her venerable years. She had acted such a dignified part in society so recently, had snubbed an earl and patronized the wealthy Mr. McCracken with such imperturbable *sang-froid*, that Medea was amazed at this laying aside of state and majesty. It seemed incredible that she could assume such lofty airs and graces at will.

Not many days passed before Miss Godbold betrayed an inquisitive mind. At the outset her interests were keen in the direction of Philomela, Apollo, and Flora, but very soon her questions pressed nearer home. Though subterfuge was unknown to Medea, she was yet full of courage. She could be silent or refuse point-blank to give information required.

"I would rather not say, Aunt Dorothea," or "I cannot tell you," were replies that

sometimes stiffened the old lady's backbone. She was not accustomed to be denied or set aside. Yet it was impossible to force Medea's confidence, she soon found. Though again and again she reverted to the days at Hornhausen, she gleaned very little concerning Medea's life there.

One day she introduced Sir Bruce Onslow's name in an apparently inadvertent way, pointing out the property to which he was the heir.

"Susan Onslow can't really go on living much longer. She was born five years before me, and has been bedridden these nine months. It's a nice little place of hers, though Sir Bruce is not one that will ever care for landlording." Medea betrayed no concern, only calmly raising her eyes to the stack of chimneys pointed out to her. "Let down the window, and you'll see it better, my dear." They were driving in an antiquated yellow chariot at the time.

"Susan dotes on him, poor old soul, and he don't care a jot for her. A sort of admirable Crichton, a delightful young man, with every accomplishment to charm the soul out of a girl's body, ain't he?" continued Miss Dorothea cheerfully, looking towards Medea as if for a reply.

"Yes," she said slowly, "he can do many things well. You heard him play at our concert. He is a good musician."

She turned her face a little more to the distant chimneys. Miss Dorothea studied her profile.

"Fiddlestrings and fiddlesticks! God bless my soul, he plays well enough. I've heard that he practises tunes as well on girls' hearts rather too often. I suppose you saw him make a fool of some poor innocent at Hornhausen?"

Medea let down the sash of the window completely. The atmosphere of the carriage was stifling to her.

"I don't think German girls live much in any Fool's Paradise," she answered; "they are wonderfully practical, you know, and not easily deceived."

Miss Godbold twitched her bonnet-strings.

"I didn't ask for general information concerning the nation, my dear. But there, I suppose you won't betray any friends. The Lord knows he's handsome enough to turn any girl's head; and nowadays it's only 'whistle, and I'll come to you, my lad,' good looks or not. We weren't so keen about matrimony in my time. It's the competition that does it." The acerbity of Miss Godbold's voice was marked. Medea turned round and looked at her. "Ah, you may open your eyes, you poor innocent, but it's God's truth, that marriage is the aim and end of nine-tenths of the girls you meet. And there are more fashions and

follies than dress and accomplishments to achieve the end. The bait is for ever being changed, and in consequence the fish gets more wary. Lady probationers at hospitals tell me, indeed! Philanthropic are they? Influenced by a large sympathy for humanity—very much of the *man*ity, no doubt. Don't they mostly end by picking up some young idiot of a sawbones walking there? And as to your Girton and Newnham students, haven't I seen 'em making eyes at professors and dons? They'll let nothing alone that wears a pair of trousers."

Fortunately, at this juncture one of Miss Godbold's rustic subjects passed the carriage, and the current of her wrath was diverted. The individual who drew her attention from the subject of womankind reeled about from side to side as he proceeded, making a vain attempt to touch his hat. Miss Godbold pulled the check-string

fiercely, and the chariot drew up. She vociferated loud summons to the man, who assumed a *debonnair* grace of attitude against a gate-post.

"Timothy Poley, you're drunk again, and in broad daylight! Why, man alive, this is the second time in the week. Lie down in that ditch and hide yourself, you brute. You're nothing better than a hog, with your nose for ever in a swill-tub. Don't go home to your poor wife and those ten children she does her best to bring up decently. You'll end in the workhouse, I dare swear. Drive on, Meekins. Never mind him—drive over him if he can't keep out of the way. The sooner the world is rid of such rubbish the better."

Such speeches and action were altogether a new experience to Medea. And the novelty was a wholesome distraction to her mind. She had lived all her life in certain narrow grooves, only occasionally

being carried out of them by her strong imagination and poetic feelings. Hitherto she had not been called to look on many sides of life. Perhaps this in part accounted for her intensity. She struck strong deep roots because there was an immense vitality of emotion in her, which had no chance of dissipating itself in other ways. But she soon perceived how much genuine kindness lived beneath Miss Godbold's eccentricities and domineering disposition.

She enjoyed being at Hangerfield; she was happy there. There was leisure and refinement; there was tranquillity, with a leaven of comedy to hinder stagnation. Here she was free from the continual stir and bustle inseparable from a country doctor's house, with a dispensary attached. The constant jingle of the bell, the sounds of rustic feet and uncouth voices, were disturbing influences apart from the

domestic worries which were discussed and turned inside out daily in full conclave. To Medea it seemed so very unimportant that the butcher had sent two ounces short weight, or that Mary Ann had burnt a hole in the doctor's shirt. Now she no longer knew if it was washing or baking day. The vaporous exhalations of laundry-work and Mary Ann Allnut's testy moods were forgotten. Here her large airy bedchamber, with the comfortable easy-chair and pretty writing-table, was swept and garnished as by invisible hands; whereas at Lakenham ministrations at the altar of cleanliness were irregular and apt to be prolonged till eventide. It generally happened, if Medea took refuge in the small attic which was her bedroom, settling herself with books or writing materials, that scrubbing-brushes and dusters were brought up by Mary Ann, with the announcement—

"I'm just goin' to tight up yowr room a bit, Miss Medie. It don't singafy a brass farthing 'bout theem books. I'll go bail yowr head is chuck-full of larning."

Neither was her music acceptable to unsympathetic ears at home. Several times impatient objections to practising had escaped Mrs. Morgan within her hearing.

At Hangerfield the morning was her own to dispose of as she would, and she was no longer harassed by petty slights or cramping conditions. She openly declared to Miss Godbold that she rejoiced in a new liberty. Outwardly she had the appearance of having settled contentedly to this life, taking up her favourite pursuits with energy if not enthusiasm. One evening, however, the suggestion of a change startled the old lady out of her complacent mood.

"I have been thinking, Aunt Dorothea,

of going abroad again now that Flora has come home. There is no place for me at Lakenham. I should not be missed at all."

Medea sat at an open window. The afternoon had been balmy, but now the dusk was falling and a chilly little wind crept in. A thrush outside in the yew tree was singing an evening hymn to the dying day, and the girl had asked that the casement might remain open.

"Abroad? Hoity-toity! What next? Companion-ing again, or will it be governessing next? Not enough to do here, I suppose—no disagreeable tasks? New pastures—fresh mischief——" Miss Godbold shut the drawer of her writing-table with a bang. "You'll not go away with my blessing or approval. So you're tired of an old woman's company already?"

The old lady came briskly across the room and sat down on the ottoman beside

Medea. The girl covered the wrinkled hand with her own, clasping it with a close caress. She shook her head with a sort of gentle denial.

"I should never be tired of staying here; but it would not be good for me. And at home, as I have told you, they do not want me. I am of no use whatever, and—and somehow—it is my own fault, of course—my life seems apart from theirs. I am like a visitor—not as one of them. And surely, somewhere in this world, there must be something for me to do. I have not found a place where any one wants me; and oh, it seems hard! I could never be happy to be idle. Perhaps, if I go away, I shall try to teach. It is surely a great profession to teach well or wisely. I have been receiving all my life, and now it does seem time for me to give out. If I fail in teaching, publishers will give me work to translate. Away from home there

would be nothing to be ashamed of in earning a living. They do not understand at Lakenham. They would like me to fold my hands and live in genteel idleness. Why has God given me gifts if I am not to use them—if no one is to be the better for them? But they seem to think it a disgrace for a woman to use her talents. Oh, it cannot be that I am always wrong —that I cannot think right about anything!"

Medea had hurried on with impetuous speech, but with her eyes averted. It was quite possible that even Miss Godbold would not be able to see things in her light. No one ever seemed to understand.

The old lady rose softly from her seat, and went up and down the room once or twice before speaking. Meanwhile the darkness fell, and the chill evening air crept into the room. Medea could no longer see the outline of the embroidery

on her knee, and laid down her needle. But the thrush outside went on singing more joyously, as though refusing to believe the night was at hand.

At last Miss Godbold paused, facing Medea. Her face was stern and set, and she spoke in a recitative way, as though relating a story. Her quiet mien was more impressive than her fiery gesticulations. Another chamber of this old lady's heart was opened to Medea.

"In our youth, Medea, we take our own measure with careless indifference. We think then that we know the shape of life that will fit us best, and will listen to no counsel from others. But oh! my dear, believe me, it is the early circumstances of your life foolishly cut out which make the latter ones such sad misfits. You know we never can take off our first mistakes; at best you can only hide them. To me it seems, my child, on looking back,

that life is like a huge warehouse. You have your choice of certain materials at the outset—God knows they are poor enough materials in some cases!—but there are none which may not be fashioned into some good or useful thing. Circumstances only make the weak culpable and bad. Those who are strong will ever shape their circumstances. It is what we have chosen, or tried to do, or done, which makes you and me what we now are. At the outset of life we act with so little thought, following our fancy or our vanity where it leads us. It is in ignorance mostly that we waste our chances and abuse our materials, and because of our own folly and want of foresight we rail at fate when life turns out full of unrest and poor achievements."

Then Medea raised her head, and clasped her hands together, crying—

"I understand—oh, I understand, why

you say this to me, and all that you mean. You think that I am shaping circumstances only to please myself—that my life even now is a misfit because I will not be guided. Ah, yes! I may deserve to be shut out from the home circle, because I abandoned it of my own will; but it is not true that I want to get away from the coldness and the vexations, or that my vanity is wounded because I am unnoticed at home. Perhaps it does seem to you, Aunt Dorothea, that I am cutting out my patterns carelessly, being unwilling to put toilsome, uncongenial work into my life. You think that I am like a crying Pharisee, saying, 'Let me know my duty, and I will do it;' and when I am required to give up the things I love best that I fall away from good intentions. Can you think now that all my accomplishments, all my certificates, weigh in the balance with my mother's love? There is no isolation like

this—to be shut out from her heart." Medea paused a moment, laying her hand upon her breast, as if to still its heaving. "My mother does not love me—you must have seen that—every one knows it. Nothing I do is right in her eyes. They have all got used to living without me; I am like a stranger to them. I cannot bear my life at home any longer. Home did I say? I have no home. Oh, have pity upon me, and do not say I must go back to it, that it is my duty to return. I cannot see any aim or meaning in life there; it is only existence." The passionate, pleading voice of the girl rose and fell with a sorrowful cadence in the large room. The thrush had hushed its singing, and it was quite dark outside. The room was cold near the open window, but yet the two women did not draw near to the fire. Tears were falling from Medea's eyes upon Miss Godbold's hands. She began to speak more gently after a little

space. "I think no one can understand exactly what I feel. All my talents seem to have been wasted—all my love, all my life, to be given in vain. It is as though God had said I should for ever be an unprofitable servant."

The anguished tone of the girl's voice stirred Miss Dorothea's heart with great pity.

"Suppose you come and live with me?" she said.

"Ah no," answered Medea quickly. "I thought you might propose that. But you do not want me really. I would not be a necessity to you. It would be a lotus-eating life."

Miss Godbold rose hurriedly, and stamped her stick against the ground in the impatience of anger.

"Good heavens! don't talk to me of necessity. Everything I want is a necessity. I never indulged in a luxury since I set

my face against lovers," she said, smiling grimly.

Medea pleaded, "Ah, do not be vexed with me. Try to understand me. I do not want to indulge or please myself. I only want to be somewhere where I can help others, if it is in ever such a small way. When I was a child, Aunt Dorothea, all my dreams were of doing something great and achieving fame. I longed to convince my mother and those who opposed me that there was some good in trying to become clever. No great things seemed impossible to do then. But the world goes on getting bigger and more puzzling as you grow up. In the full daylight Hope gets so much further off, it gets more difficult even to touch it. You know the sky is so much nearer to you when you are a little child than ever after. Of course it goes on broadening and deepening as our sight gets stronger, and then we find that our

most patient walking towards the horizon brings us no nearer to it. Perhaps then we despair, or if we do not, we begin to occupy ourselves with little things close at hand, and do not stretch out towards things too high and too vast. Now I am content if I can serve in the humblest way, for indeed—oh, indeed I have missed all the higher and more blessed things of life."

Miss Dorothea closed the window sharply. Her cracked voice was sarcastic when she spoke.

"But, my dear, you might serve in a humble way if you lived with me."

Medea sighed, and she thought of the good days and the peaceful years she might spend here. It was so hard to resist. And yet her principles of action were strong. She closed her eyes a moment, and a vision of rest and culture and refinement tempted her. She put it from her.

"Ah, not in any real way. You would

give me trifling tasks to do to satisfy me, but they would be done as well without me —other people would serve you better in the practical ways you require."

"Chut, chut, girl! Is it nothing for me to have a young thing about me at my latter end? Can a childless old woman have no need of compassion and love? Ah well, I might have known. To the young the road is always cleanest on the other side. We old travellers just jog along in the dirt. You think there is more merit in toiling amongst strangers than in biding at my hearthstone. But what is it that your great man says? Your America is here or nowhere."

Then Miss Godbold moved away from Medea's immediate presence. She took her seat at the wide, old-fashioned hearth and stirred the smouldering logs into more vigorous life. The red flames, leaping up quickly, played fitfully over china and

portraits and lighted up dark corners. Medea's pale looks were revealed now. There were signs of conflict about her trembling lips and sorrowful eyes.

"Come here, Medea." Miss Dorothea's voice was more soft than Medea had ever heard it before. She came and knelt on the hearthrug at the old lady's knee. There was a little pause, and then in the same hushed voice Miss Godbold continued—

"When I was a girl, more than fifty years ago, I was reckoned the beauty of the county. I played with men's hearts as foolish girls sometimes do. It was my greatest pleasure to win their admiration and to have them at my beck and call. I lived for amusement and shaped my life for my own empty vanities, for gaieties and conquest; I was even proud of a reputation for heartlessness. I was very happy, or I thought I was. I enjoyed the

pleasures of life well and revelled in my power. It was not long before it all came to an end, and since then life has never been the same. A man came across my path at last, whom I could have loved, ay! —why should I shame to say it now?—a man whom I did love with all my heart and soul. My God! to think that soon it will be sixty years ago! He sought me like the rest of them. I was the toast of the county then. He did for me all that my most devoted lovers did; and I, vain fool, thought that the end would come as before, that he would lay his heart at my feet. I pictured it all in an ecstasy of bliss. I acted the scene and my own words in response a dozen times. I thought of the delicious surrender that I should make at last of all my pride. Oh, how sweet it would be to do his bidding. My last conquest was something, indeed, to make any girl vain, for I was a country

girl, and he a man of the world who had been much in society and had seen beauty at courts in every land. I never dreamed that he was fighting me with my own weapons, playing at love to win my heart. It all came to an end suddenly, and the beautiful dream vanished utterly. He left me one evening after a ball, with a careless "good-bye" and a smiling face. Without a word of previous warning, he told me that he was going abroad at once on diplomatic service and would be away for years. It had all been very pleasant—he hoped I would not forget him. Like a thunderbolt the blow fell upon me unprepared. I, the fascinating beauty who had flouted a score of men, to be tossed aside by the one man I had hoped to win; nay, who had given me every reason to believe he loved me! This was a judgment indeed. And so, my girl, you see me here a childless, unwedded old woman. No later cir-

cumstances in life have seemed to fit me well because of my early follies and——"

Medea had hidden her face in her hands, but a little sob broke from her.

"My child,—there is no parallel—between my case and yours. We both—have loved—unworthy men; but I brought it on myself; you, I know, have not merited your trouble."

Medea lifted her face and cast a searching glance upwards.

"You know?" she said in surprise.

"Yes, I know," answered Miss Godbold, not looking at her.

There was a long silence. Then Medea spoke again.

"Oh, it is sad to live to be old—alone. It seems to me that now I see all my life stretching dull and blank before me. I shall be, perhaps, solitary and unloved to the end. The bitterness of having given my love in vain is almost past; but there

is my future; I cannot see what to do with it." A little pause. "You have known, Aunt Dorothea, what it is to love and to be falsely dealt with. And you, after so many years, have hardly lived your anguish down. The pain and grief—of a desolate, ruined life—remains. There are—a few people who—never forget. I would like to know, Aunt Dorothea, if you ever saw him again—that man whom you loved? Did he come back and mock you with a *second* tale of love? Is he yet alive?"

Then Miss Godbold suddenly withdrew her hand from Medea's urgent clasp and sat bolt upright. Her eyes blazed with revived fire, and there was a grim irony in her voice which marked her words.

"See him! why, God bless my soul, he lived within a couple of miles of Hangerfield for years. He gave up diplomacy, and came back to settle in his native

county. He made love to me as a married man, with a dark-eyed child toddling beside him. Though he took every care of his digestion and heart that a selfish man can, he's dead now these ten years. His wife was an Italian actress—a lovely creature they said. I never heard that he actually ill used her, but he neglected her, and never brought her to England. Poor soul! I have often thought of her. She was the mother of your lover, Medea."

The girl drew back a little from Miss Godbold's chair. Her eyes were opened wide with a startled look.

"My lover!" she repeated in a breathless way.

The wrinkled old face was turned steadily to the girl's now. With angry distinctness and emphasis Miss Godbold said—

"Yes, your lover. *Bon sang ne peut mentir*, they say, girl. Bruce Onslow, a

coward and a false lover like his father before him, is the Italian woman's child!"

The fierce light faded from the old lady's face, and she fell back in her chair exhausted. Medea, softly turning, went away from her presence unheard.

CHAPTER II.

A PRETTY PASTORAL.

The hardiest and bravest Achilles—in these days he modestly wears trousers and boots—has his vulnerable spot. We may be dipped trebly in the Styx of worldly prosperity, success, or fame, but this does not ensure any one of us a charmed existence against certain malicious arrows. If our enemy only knows where to hit us! And this he sometimes finds out by accident. Depend upon it, even those sleek-looking idlers clothed in broadcloth and fine linen, men whom you envy greatly, as as well as those fair and happy-looking

matrons and careless virgins you admire so vastly, have frequently uneasy qualms concerning some weak joint in their social harness. Ay, truly there are few amongst us who do not possess at least one pair of shoes that pinch horribly.

Our highly respected friend Joseph McCracken was indeed a brave and relentless Achilles at the Lambeth works. No one had a notion that the pressure of any adverse circumstances could touch him. A hard taskmaster, an admirable accountant, and, in short, a business man of the very first water, his partners held him in high esteem. The Company bowed down in admiration of his superior abilities. Amidst flour-sacks and noisy machinery he was beyond suspicion of mortal weaknesses. Here his courage and dominion were intact, and no notion of a weak part in the mind that moved them ever intruded itself amongst his subordinates. Without doubt

he was a mighty man of valour down at the water side.

Yet the pangs of despised love, or what he considered such, were hard to bear, difficult to conceal. His vanity suffered real torture from the slight which he considered had been put upon him. The only consolation remaining to him under the painful circumstances was the fact that he had not openly declared himself to Medea. It was probable that some onlookers had seen the drift of his intentions, but still they could not positively pronounce his defeat. The worst they could say was that he had beaten a retreat. Yet Mr. McCracken was uneasy and dissatisfied, though he hugged his own self-respect. He was at present disposed to quarrel with the fate that had revealed Miss Longstaffe's mind to him. In fact, he did not know where to resent his disappointment.

The truth was that, on the evening of

Tom Ringrose's declaration to Medea, Mr. McCracken had played the poor part of eavesdropper. He had taken a circuitous path round the park in the dusk, with the full intention of meeting the young lady he destined to honour with a proposal. He had purposed on her return from the lake to make her a formal offer of his hand. Certainly he had not calculated that any younger swain would escort her, or forestall his intentions. Premeditating the words of his offer, Mr. McCracken came upon the pair unawares. They were far too much absorbed in their own little play to think of an audience. No doubt a pathway skirting a wood was a dangerous situation to choose for a love episode. Any young lady of Miss Rachel's experience would have cast an eye about her in such a situation.

The tender scene had thus been enacted within sight and hearing of Mr. McCrac-

ken. So astounded indeed was he at the first warning note of Tom's imploring voice, that he slipped behind a tree and forgot the code of honour, if indeed he had ever learnt it.

The discovery of Tom's passion greatly agitated him. His mind had been intent on Sir Bruce, and he had speculated freely on Medea's possible predilection for that fascinating man without having regard to any other. Moreover, the artful Rachel had led him to believe that Mr. Ringrose was in *her* toils. And he had himself seen his daughter daily on the ice laying herself out palpably to please their eligible neighbour. This very afternoon as he had walked towards the scene of action he had congratulated himself that Tom's regular attendance at Lakenham water argued well for Rachel's chances.

He was anxious to see her married and settled, more anxious than before since the

vista of individual domestic joys had opened before him. And to become a great county lady was a piece of good luck Rachel had not deserved. After all, it would be a far better match than the baronet, who was so slack in pushing opportunity. Rachel might miss a title and yet fall on her feet. The family of a wealthy commoner of long descent held a position more desirable than Sir Bruce could offer; for by this time Mr. McCracken had arrived at the point of despising the baronet's pretensions and of exalting Tom's. The revelation in the wood was a sad blow to his hopes, individual and paternal. He literally staggered beneath this sudden and unexpected catastrophe. And the girl actually refused this suitor, who pleaded with the humility of a nobody. This was food for meditation hereafter. Mr. McCracken went home a crestfallen man, with all the attributes of a

conquering hero subdued. If Medea had the spirit to set at naught the advantages of wealth and position offered her by Mr. Ringrose, would it be likely that she would be tempted by a more elderly lover of less aristocratic lineage? It was clear she would never yield herself to purchase-money. In Mr. McCracken's eyes the advantages of money were so incomparably great and persuasive that he could not understand it. It was altogether a mystery to him.

Nothing remained to him now but to swallow his disappointment, and be thankful that he had not committed himself by an offer. He had been in imminent danger of a refusal.

Not long after this untoward event Rachel received notice that the household would remove to town shortly for the season—not to the unfashionable locality of Clapham, but to a furnished house

in Eaton Place. Mr. McCracken was minded to taste of fashionable frivolities, and he announced with a certain degree of fierceness that he intended "to go the whole hog." Rachel, though tolerably familiar with her parent's vernacular, hardly knew what interpretation to put upon these words. But at this period Mr. McCracken's moods were so irritable and uncertain, that she wisely abstained from exasperating queries. This young lady was nothing loth to migrate to gayer scenes and a larger field of action. The stagnation of early spring in the country had set in. The shooting season was over, and a period of wet weather in fill-dyke February put an end to her hunting achievements. Lenten fasts and solemnity prevailed over the Pilkingtons and other righteously minded clerics. And now there was no musical barytone at her side daily to troll out love ditties or make soft

speeches on gloomy afternoons. Rachel always became sentimental when time hung heavy on her hands. It is a way women have when no active duties or urgent frivolities occupy them. Perhaps men more often escape this dangerous frame of mind, having fewer intervals of indoor idleness to fill up.

During several weeks of intolerable dullness Rachel corresponded regularly with a young man who had gone to the Cape. Chatty, sparkling letters, almost brilliant at times, they were, yet worded in cautious terms, which could not compromise her. Yet Apollo cherished them and slept upon them, and thought a good deal about the writer.

Had she done or said anything before Apollo's departure which committed her?

You may rest safely assured that this little baggage wove no strand of any fetter to bind herself. Certainly she had be-

stowed upon the young soldier a flattering tinted photograph of herself, receiving a corresponding portrait, minus the flattery, of himself in exchange; but not a word of love or tenderness accompanied this gift. Apollo confidently believed that she was bound to him, otherwise engaged to wait his return, little knowing that in some cases a female code of honour is as flexible as a Trichinopoly chain.

Rachel was not painfully constrained by this entanglement. When opportunity offered she flirted as freely as ever, and when she moved to London it was with the fullest intention of enjoying her season. She had no particular vows of constancy to remember. Of course, she had liked that handsome young Longstaffe, but now that he was gone she was aware it had all been a very foolish proceeding. He was adorably handsome, and she hoped he would not get killed or, still worse,

wounded, for that might bring him home invalided. In the mean time she expected that he would forget her or that an eligible *parti* might come in her way. Rachel, after she came to town and there were no more dull evenings, made up her mind to drop the correspondence gradually. She must let him down easily, of course! Then she glanced at his photograph framed in the latest invention. Oh dear! how handsome he was, and what a charming impetuous lover! Rachel had the grace to recognize the qualities she lacked. That boyish eagerness, that sulky fierceness, how admirably they suited him! If he had only held a good position, or were rich, she might admit him the most charming of men. Then, indeed, she might cut those strong strings which bound her heart to prudence and worldly considerations.

When Easter came Rachel was quite

accustomed to the manner of London life. She had no longings for green fields or primroses, but aired herself in the Park in splendid equipages, and bought new bonnets every week with unflagging zest. She had been presented at Court by a lady mayoress, a former friend, and had made many new acquaintances in the fashionable world, and had kicked down a few old ladders that had helped her ascent in the social scale at Clapham. These worthy people were in the main not surprised at being cut by a young lady who had so rapidly risen to distinction.

Mr. McCracken was, however, restless in spite of all. "Going the whole hog" did not appear so satisfactory. During the recess it occurred to him to take a temporary flight to Lakenham. His mind still reverted to Medea, strange to say. The thought of his music-room, an idea for some time in abeyance, now revived.

Casually encountering Sir Bruce Onslow at a club, a day or two before his departure for Flatshire, Mr. McCracken invited him to accompany him to Lakenham. He no longer cherished any animosity towards the younger man. It seemed quite certain there was nothing between Medea and the baronet. Sir Bruce had dined in Eaton Place two or three times, and had made himself more agreeable than of yore. The conversation on these occasions had hardly touched on Lakenham, and Rachel refrained from any reference to the incidents of the past winter. Dick Ringrose, who turned up in town, was also invited to dine at the McCrackens', and found that the absence of an elder brother facilitated his advances towards Miss McCracken, as it had already done with other young ladies. The next-of-kin to an elder brother travelling in dangerous latitudes was not to be neg-

lected or despised. Oh, Madam Ringrose, you were an unwise lady to let this innocent abroad in London town at the mercy of designing daughters and manœuvring mammas!

When Mr. McCracken proposed to Sir Bruce that he should accompany him for a few days to Lakenham, the young man accepted on the spot.

"I was thinking of running down to the sea-side, Margate or Worthing, for a quiet week. Delighted to come with you instead, Mr. McCracken. I've a heavy paper for one of the quarterlies on hand, full of statistics, and it must go to print in a few days; but a man really gets no peace in London for work."

The proposal to run down to Flatshire was agreeable to Sir Bruce, and there was an unusual degree of willingness in his acceptance. He still harboured a wish to see Medea—an unaccountable wish, you

may say, since he had acknowledged her refusal as final and irrevocable.

Thus the two men who went down to Lakenham on the day preceding Good Friday were each moved by the same motive, and each on their guard lest the other should detect an inspiring purpose.

Good Friday turned out wet, and Sir Bruce devoted himself to his heavy article, while Mr. McCracken prowled about the park and made tentative remarks to gamekeepers and gardeners respecting the families in the neighbourhood.

On the Saturday following Miss Flora Longstaffe betook herself in the morning to Lakenham woods with an ornamental basket over her arm, having the intention of gathering flowers for the decoration of the church on the morrow. In one of the lonely glades where oxslips and primroses made a pretty carpet she encountered a

tall and comely stranger—a bearded dark-eyed man. Strephon at last! Here was a strange chance indeed. Miss Flora furtively tilted her hat to what she knew to be the fashionable angle. It was sufficient to give an intimation of her elaborate hair-dressing. What a lucky chance that the bright sunshine this morning had tempted her to put on a spring gown and the new hat! The man approaching her carried a book under his arm, and as he drew nearer she timidly lifted her eyes. He gazed at her curiously from afar, walking more slowly as he approached. He had been striding along rapidly when he first caught sight of her. What lovely little shepherdess was this?

Flora, with her big hat and lace-trimmed frock, was indeed a bewitching little flower-girl, yet somehow looking as if woodland paths and damp places were strange to her. She was certainly more the type of a bazaar

vendor or of a stage rustic than of a true country hoyden.

Sir Bruce stood aside from the narrow path and lifted his hat as she passed.

"Merci," she murmured shyly, dropping her eyelids. For the moment Flora forgot she was not in France. The courteous manners and the air of cities about the stranger made her oblivious for an instant of later experiences of rustic uncouthness. As Flora went on her little brain was busy wondering who he could be. He was certainly not like any Englishman she had seen. She thought of the doctor and Mr. Pilkington and sighed.

It had not as yet been bruited abroad that Mr. McCracken and a guest had arrived at the Hall. Such news might have stirred a new interest in Flora's mind a couple of days since. Anything that changed the monotonous aspect of things was acceptable. This little maid was ready to cling to any

straw which might save her from the stream of unvarying dullness.

So far Flora's basket only contained a few pale primroses. She did not pluck flowers carefully and steadily. It made her back ache to stoop, and the stalks stained her fingers. At the first bend in the path she set her shoulders against an old oak, and began to puzzle her small brains over her little adventure. But it was of no use. No light came. The stranger who seemed to know his way about Lakenham woods could not be accounted for.

At last she plunged deeper into the wood, and began in earnest to gather anemones. After more than an hour she crept homewards by a different track, difficult to follow, across which the hazel and maple boughs stretched vigorous arms. Flora grew cross and tired, struggling against these impediments. She had torn the flounce of her pretty dress, and needed to hold it as well

as the basket. She decided that such excursions were hateful as she was struck smartly in the face by a backward swinging branch. Her smart hat had now fallen too far backwards to be modish, but none would quarrel with its set while it revealed such a lovely petulant face. Yes, woodland walks and rambles were all very well in books and pictures, but they were disagreeable and perilous adventures in practice. Her dainty boots were disfigured with green mud, for in the depths of the wood she had strayed into some boggy dell, and she surveyed them in dismay. Panting and flushed, Flora parted the hazel branches angrily for the last time. She knew that the stile which led into the fields was close at hand. So apparently did some one else. As the girl's eyes fell upon the man she had before encountered, leaning against this stile, a pretty colour rose to her face. She was conscious of her disarray, not knowing it was pic-

turesque. At the very last struggle with the obstructing branches her hairpins had proved faithless. A long strand of golden brown hair now strayed down her back.

Sir Bruce, lifting his head, saw her hesitation, her pretty embarrassment, and her charming attitude. He moved a few paces out of her way when she prepared to mount the stile. Flora, with a resolve to ignore this intrusive stranger, held her little head aloft. But alas! not looking, she tripped on the last step, and the basket dropped from her grasp. She only saved herself from an ignominious descent at the cost of her flowers.

"Oh, oh!" she cried aloud. "My flowers all spoilt, after all my trouble."

Sir Bruce, at this piteous plaint, was beside her in a moment.

"Not much damage done, I think," he said. "Allow me to help you."

With becoming gravity he offered his

hand. It was lucky he did not smile. Flora took the hand extended to her, glancing at him for a moment under her curved eyelashes before she descended.

"Oh, thank you; you are very kind. If you only knew the trouble I have taken. I have been all the morning gathering them. And only see how I have spoilt my gloves."

She extended a small tan member, marked with sticky green juices. Flora had a sweetly confidential way, which at times made her appear younger than she was.

"That was only to be expected. You should not wear gloves with six buttons," he said without apparent sarcasm as he grasped, in a man's way, at the scattered flowers, with perfect indifference to heads or stalks. The delicate petals were grievously bruised.

Flora veiled her lovely eyes with a little

embarrassment. Perhaps he thought her foolish.

"I had quite forgotten," she said, with a sort of penitence, "that flowers stain so. It is a long time since I picked them for myself. In Paris we always bought them nicely mounted on wire, or with paper round the stalks. Don't you think that is a much nicer way of getting them?"

Her gravity was beyond suspicion as she spoke. She gave a little sigh of regret recalling the gay flower-markets.

"You do not appear to be born to the manner of pastoral pleasures and simplicities." There was an artificial ring in the stranger's words even in Flora's ears, but she rather liked it. "I always fancied," he continued, "that Floras and shepherdesses knew nothing of six-buttoned gloves."

The lovely grey eyes were lifted once more—this time with startled amazement.

"How *did* you know my name was Flora?"

Sir Bruce gave a little laugh. Her surprise was delicious.

"Ah, really, have I hit the mark so well? I must be a wizard, of course."

Flora pouted and tossed her little head. He continued to smile at her bewilderment. She shook her head more emphatically at last.

"But you *are* quite mistaken in one thing, for I was born at Lakenham, and lived here all my life till three years ago."

"Then your simplicity is native?" If there was any irony in his speech she did not understand it. "After all, I shall write a pastoral," he concluded.

There was a little pause. Then Flora said with evident hesitation—

"What is a pastoral?" Another flitting blush, another casting down of the white lids. It seemed to Sir Bruce that every

attitude was more entrancing than the last.

"A pastoral is generally a poem on country pleasures. Minding cows and sheep or picking flowers can seem idyllic."

Flora looked rather graver. There was a touch of awe in her voice.

"How very nice to write poetry. And are you really a poet? And do people read your poetry? Is it easy to do?"

Flora held out her basket to receive the final handful of scraped-up flowers. Sir Bruce was nearer to her than he had been before. His eyes rested with satisfaction on the peach-blossom face.

"Yes, people do read my poetry, I am told; but in confidence I will tell you it is not at all easy to do. I don't get an inspiration often nowadays, and I have taken to writing prosy articles."

Flora laughed prettily. "Oh, then you

must be quite a celebrated writer. Thank you so much for helping me. I must be going now." She passed her torn flounce over her arm.

"I think I ought to write a sonnet to a distressed Flora with a lap full of primroses. That would be more satisfactory than an eclogue."

A hesitating glance upwards, a momentary parting of Flora's lips as if she were about to speak. Instead, however, of giving utterance to any words she bent her head downwards.

"Would that offend you?" Sir Bruce said in an appealing way.

Flora grew rosy red, but shook her head. At last she found voice to say—

"How shall I know—who—you mean it for? What is your name, and will the poetry be put in a book so that every one may read it—and if I like—may I say it is about—*me?*"

He laughed softly. "You may call me Zephyr if you like. Zephyr once told some pretty tales about Flora."

She pouted again in vexed perplexity. "I really must go now. Thank you again for helping me. Good-bye."

The pretty "good-bye" fell musically on the air as, with a little dignified bow, she passed on.

The next day being Sunday Sir Bruce was devoutly disposed to go to church, much to Mr. McCracken's amazement. And Flora knew before the day was over who her Zephyr really was.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE VALLEY.

On a bright morning in May a letter in Mrs. Morgan's handwriting was carried down to Medea in the breakfast-room at Hangerfield. The post-bag was always taken direct to Miss Godbold's own room, so that she took cognizance of the correspondence of her household. Before the maid who had delivered the letter to Medea had ascended the staircase on her return to the old lady's apartment, the girl flew past her up the shallow steps. She reached Miss Dorothea's room breathless, and entered without knocking.

"Aunt Dorothea, see here," she said in

accents of fear. "Mother has written to me to come home. Phil is very ill, and they have sent Flora away to the rectory. It must be something dangerous—infectious—but she does not say. I must go away to-day as soon as possible. They want me now."

Philomela had written a few days previously, and had complained of a headache and sore throat, but no presentiment of the evil to come had visited Medea. It was now six weeks since she had first come to Hangerfield, and she had not seen Flora since her return. Indeed, the sisters were almost strangers, having met but rarely since their childhood. In Flora's opinion her sister Medea was a puzzling sort of person. In spite of her much learning and many accomplishments, she did not see much to admire about her. People always said she was handsome, and her photographs certainly represented her as not common-

place. Then it was still more foolish of her not to dress fashionably or show herself to advantage. From what mamma had said regarding her eldest sister it was clear that the warfare of her "whys" had not ceased in her mature years. It had always been one of Medea's uncomfortable ways to set people wondering and fidgeting about things that did not in the least matter. It was certainly not nice of her at all to continue these objectionable customs. So Miss Flora entertained a sort of scornful pity for that eldest sister, who lived on a platform apart from any of the frivolous joys in which her own little soul delighted. On the other hand, Medea, full of her idealities, cherished the thought of Flora as of one exquisitely "winning" and full of pretty "ways." She even represented these charms to Miss Godbold, recalling Flora's infantile petulance and cunning little tricks, making a pretty picture out of childish tempers and

naughtiness. Miss Dorothea was remarkably patient with Medea's exaltations and enthusiasms, I admit. Twice the girl had broached the subject of her departure from Hangerfield, but on each occasion her proposal to leave had been angrily set aside.

"They don't want you at home. You admit it yourself," said the old lady ruthlessly. "Your America *must* be here."

But no negative reply was forthcoming this third time when Medea spoke of leaving.

The venerable dame in undress attire was something wonderful to behold. She wore a huge nightcap, with frills overlapping her forehead, and a scarlet flannel bed-gown concealed her figure. As she sat up beneath the canopy of a mighty four-poster, with a silk patchwork counterpane covering the bedclothes, she was a sight no less surprising than when arrayed in the magnificence of full-dress.

"Charlotte is ready to sacrifice you *now*. Ah, yes; I see, my dear. The incapable one is good enough for such an emergency. Yes, you shall go. Give me her letter."

Then Miss Godbold took the incoherent epistle from Medea's grasp. The matter appeared serious, though Philomela's illness was not specified. Mrs. Morgan had written in a helpless, incapable way, and her letter was at once indefinite and despairing. At all costs Medea was enjoined to come back instantly. She was even charged with selfishness in having remained away so long. She had been leading a life of idle luxury and, of course, she did not care if they all died, so long as she enjoyed herself, and so on.

"Well, to be sure, this is a letter. All heads and tails, with no rhyme or reason in it. Nothing clear about it except the dashes. Go, of course you shall go. Charlotte will place you in the breach, no

doubt, for old death to aim at. I hope that doctor will look after you. He's the right sort, they tell me, with all his wits about him. The Lord can only say how he was ever captivated by Charlotte. There, there child, don't stare at me like that with those big eyes. I'll declare your mother is as wise as the Queen of Sheba, if it pleases you." Then Miss Dorothea untied her nightcap strings and signified to her attendant that she was ready to rise. She had laid aside her ordinary practice of early rising for a few days, having been laid up with sharp rheumatism. "I'll get up now, Medea, and write your mother a letter. She may as well send that child Flora here to keep your place warm. It will be better for her than staying with that ritualistic parson. She's safe to lose her complexion, fed on red herrings and skim milk. I know the way of 'em in Lent."

The old lady had conceived a violent aversion to the Pilkingtons, and was of Mr. Toovey's mind regarding uncongenial ministrations.

"Lord bless you, I'd go to chapel under my parson's nose if his doctrine didn't suit me. And as for fasting, I never did see any good come of it. Makes 'em precious bad-tempered often enough. Starving the stomach doesn't help on Christian charity, I swear," she had said to Medea, in reference to the Rev. Edward's practices.

Medea got away from Hangerfield by an early train, and after three changes and sundry waitings, Flatshire railways making no rapid advances, she reached home about five o'clock, having walked from Malham station. It was evident that she was not expected so soon, as there was no conveyance to meet her. The front door of the red-brick house stood open, Medea noticed, as she glanced up the little path; but the

little gate was locked, strange to say, and Medea had to go round to the back door to gain admittance. In a mechanical way she noticed the neatness of the little garden and the progress made by the shrubs in her absence. The daisy border was prim; the pansies and London pride grouped in tidy clumps. Not a weed was visible on the path.

It seemed that Phil's busy hands had been at work in the garden quite recently. Then she glanced upwards towards her sister's window as it came in view, the window that was always open to climbing banksias and sweet honeysuckles. It was closed to-day, and the blind partly drawn. And Philomela so loved the air and light.

Medea's steps began to lag. She dreaded, she knew not why, to enter the house. She stopped a moment outside the kitchen door, turning her face to the green fields and bursting woods, bathed in the lovely

evening light. All her life long Medea remembered the aspect of that quiet landscape. Then she turned and went within.

With a start Mrs. Jagger recognized her. She was busy over some culinary occupation.

"Miss Medie, dear heart, I thought you was a ghost coming and standing between me and the light in that quiet way. To be sure, I'm all of a tremble these two days past. You look bravely and well, dear child. And need for strength, too, with trouble before us. Mrs. Morgan she's like to lose her head over our Phil. She were never fit even to nurse sick babbies."

Medea advanced into the room. "I do not know what is the matter with Phil. Tell me the worst." Her manner was quite tranquil as she laid her little hand-bag on the table. She was one of the women who seem to put on strength in emergencies.

"It is scarlet fever," said Mrs. Jagger.

Medea drew a long breath and sat down. "Oh," she said, "this is terrible. But I am strong, and I am not afraid to nurse her." There was nothing that sounded like vain boasting in the girl's words. They were exceedingly quiet. "Where is Dr. Morgan?" she said after a little pause as she watched the pouring of beef-tea into a basin. "I must speak to him before I go upstairs."

Dr. Morgan was writing in the little surgery, but he had not heard her arrival. He started at the sound of her voice at his door.

"I have come home to nurse Phil, Dr. Morgan."

He got up, with both hands outstretched. "Well done, my girl! I knew you were brave—that you would come."

"Is it a very bad case?" she said in low tones.

"The worst form of scarlet-fever. Highly infectious. You are running a great risk, you know. Are you afraid?"

"Afraid!" she said, with steady eyes. "Oh no. I will do everything you tell me. I can be obedient."

Recalling Charlotte's anxious tearful condition, her restless maternal tenderness, manifesting itself in a continual teasing of the sick girl, the doctor felt thankful to be spared further womanly agitation.

"Your mother will not hear of a trained nurse, and she certainly will break down in a day or two. She wrote to tell you to come, of course. I advised her to do so. You had better go upstairs now and let her know you are here. Do not bring more clothes than you absolutely require into the house. Tell your mother that I wish to speak to her here, when you have taken her place in Phil's room. Yes, go now. God bless you, my girl."

Medea appeared to forget no part of her duty. The doctor, with his door ajar, heard her give orders quietly to Mrs. Jagger, and make methodical plans for coming days and nights. He was amazed at her composure, on being suddenly called upon to face peril and anxiety. He had loved her before, but the strength of her intellect had not appealed to his admiration. Now her moral fortitude did.

At last Medea went upstairs to the little room where Philomela had slept since her childhood. It adjoined Mrs. Morgan's own bedroom. A bright little chamber it was wont to be, overlooking the garden always so gay with flowers; but now the white hangings had been stripped from bed and window, and even the carpet was removed. All Phil's pretty nick-nacks and cherished photographs had been put away, and tables were destitute of ornament and drapery.

The sick girl lay quite still, with closed eyes. Even the slight vibration caused by Medea's entrance, a vibration generally so quickly felt by her, passed unnoticed. Mrs. Morgan stood near the window pouring out a draught with an unsteady hand. Her anxious expression, the traces of tears about her reddened eyelids, even the flutter of her cap ribbons, were agitating influences, undesirable in a sick-room. At a low word of greeting from Medea, she set down the bottle and burst into loud and vehement sobs. At this moment Philomela raising her heavy eyelids, uttered an inarticulate sound. A flicker of recognition passed over her face as Medea drew near to her. She smiled faintly, moving her hand, and then once more the curtains dropped over her blue eyes.

"Mother, Dr. Morgan wants to see you downstairs. If you will let me, I will stay with Phil," Medea said.

In a moment the quick maternal jealousy revived.

"Oh, I see you want to turn me out of my place. Do you think *you* can nurse Phil like her mother can, *you* who have spent all your life in dreams? I shall come back, of course, and I will not have your interference here, Medea. You understand me." At the door she turned back to deliver some final injunctions. "Mind you keep her well covered up. It is highly dangerous to get a chill."

But three blankets were not Medea's notion of relief for the poor fevered limbs. She quietly removed two of the heavy coverings and carried them out of sight into an adjoining room. As Medea bent over her in gentle ministrations Philomela seemed to recognize a new and comforting touch. Once more she opened her eyes and cast a beautiful look of content and love upwards, flinging out her arms in an

embrace. Medea, stooping down, kissed her tenderly. That was the last time for many days that the dumb girl gave any conscious sign. She became delirious that night. Her delirium showed itself in such a sad, pitiful way. Her low laughter, angry wordless murmurs, and the impatient flutter of her hands, were more distressing to witness because she gave no intelligible utterance to her wild dreamings.

On the third day of delirium Mary Ann came downstairs and sobbed before the kitchen fire, with her head hidden in her apron.

"She fares wusser nor ever, Mrs. Jagger, and she's everlasting on the fidget and itch. Eh, deary me, if she could only speak she'd just be gammicking and buzzing like a summer fly. It minds me of her father 'fore he was taken. My patience, he did talk with the fever on him! Such stuff you never heard the loike on. Sartenly it wur

larning they said, though to be sure it wur all in heathen tongues."

Night and day for a week Philomela tossed in restless torment. At times she cried and sobbed bitterly as over some childish grief or trifling misdemeanour. She went through a continual series of pantomime performance. From her gestures Medea frequently guessed her delusions. On occasions she laughed and shrieked with frantic glee, clapping her hands in mirth. That was very piteous. To see the fever-stricken girl convulsed with merriment, as some backward light was thrown upon her mind, was the saddest thing of all.

The disease ran its course, and Medea in her weeks of watching, snatching irregular hours of sleep at intervals, kept up health and heart bravely. Mrs. Morgan, paler, thinner, and more anxious, was subdued and meek beneath the prolonged strain. She had voluntarily resigned constant attend-

ance, yielding her place to Medea only when her own incapacity and helplessness were insisted upon by the doctor. Dazed and stupid with weeping and watching, she had one night administered a draught too frequently.

"She is very ill. You are endangering her life. She must be properly nursed, and you are not fit to do it, Charlotte," Dr. Morgan had said sternly.

Weeping profusely, Charlotte could only make a feeble protest.

"I am her mother. You are cruel to forbid me to do things for her."

He answered with determination, "You have made more than one mistake, wife. She will certainly die if you continue to agitate yourself in this way. If she becomes conscious and see you in this condition the consequences may be fatal."

Then Mrs. Morgan succumbed. Now she hung upon Medea's verdict in the early

mornings or late evenings with supreme submission.

If Medea said "She is rather more quiet," or "She has slept for an hour," the distracted mother would go away comforted in a degree.

The situation was very grave, though Philomela battled with the fever with all the strength of a good constitution. Dr. Garstone, on being called in from Bedmondstone to give further advice, said nothing more could be done for her. It was a sad time in the once noisy house.

Downstairs the rooms were all untenanted the greater part of the day, and the meals were at irregular hours, and partaken of in that hushed and hurried manner which declares that sickness tarries in the house. Mrs. Morgan's constant kitting was now at rest on her work-table, and she herself crept about in dressing-gown and crushed cap ribbons.

The merry month of May, beloved of Philomela because of the bright flowers which then woke to life in her garden, was warm and sunny in the beginning. "My month," she had always called it; "the time when I was born, when the nightingales always sing. Tell me again, Medie, the story of poor Philomela."

It was very strange that this dumb girl had ever taken such a lively interest in the birds. She was familiar with them all, and could give much information as to their habits. There were none she could not name at sight. Sometimes after watching them her bright face would cloud for a moment.

"But I shall never know how they sing," she would say; "and my bird, the nightingale, I know, makes the most beautiful music of all."

She would sigh a little, and then go back to her flowers, soon forgetting her grief.

News from Hangerfield came very seldom to Lakenham. Flora openly confessed to a hatred of letter-writing; besides, it was possible, she thought, that Medea might deride her bad spelling. She wrote occasional curt little notes. She hoped that Philomela would soon be well, that she was not very ill. Still she herself did not wish to come home just yet. She was very happy with Aunt Dorothea, and there was a great deal to do and see at Hangerfield. Mamma must not be anxious about her. And would she send her white silk dress at once. Sometimes people came to dinner, and she had nothing smart enough to wear. Miss Godbold had bought her a pony to ride, and there were plenty of nice novels, and sometimes the curate came to teach her to play tennis, and so on—the little tale of her dissipations.

During these days of watching and nursing a letter came also from Apollo—

a letter which Phil would have hailed with ecstatic joy. He was a real soldier now, who had been through an engagement. And Philomela had been so anxious for his baptism of fire, deriding him with malicious glee, because, as she expressed it, he had never "been in a battle."

Ah me! dear Phil, months later how proud and happy you might have been to handle well-won war medals with your inquiring fingers.

"My tongue" you were wont in your quaint way to call those ever-busy hands, spreading out the flexible fingers to the gaze of those who seemed to pity your dumbness. Your proud indignant looks resented all commiseration. As far as any outside world knew your thoughts and life were altogether joyous. And who can tell it is not so with them whose ears are stopped? Much of the evil of this world, wrought by speech, comes not nigh them.

Malice and envy and uncharitableness are not so easily or rapidly conveyed by sight. The jarring accents of bitterness, the stings of unkind sarcasm, the inflections of scorn, are never quite clear to the dumb, I think.

When the syringa bushes were in fullest flower Philomela lay dying. The powerful fragrance of the white flowers rose up to the little window of her chamber like incense on the night air. Medea stood at this window in the mute agony of extreme despair. Oh, if her life could but be given for this other life, so infinitely more precious to others!

It was between nine and ten o'clock, and still in the west a bar of light showed where the sun had gone down gloriously. Higher up myriads of golden stars twinkled merrily. Summer seemed to have come prematurely, and it had been a warm, almost a sultry day. Phil had remained in a lethargic sleep for long hours. Hope

was ebbing fast. The end did not seem far off. The fever had spent itself, but she seemed too weak to recover a hold of life.

The numbness of intense pain crept over Medea for a few moments. Oh, this agony of impending loss, this helplessness before an invisible foe drawing nearer! She lifted her sad, tearless eyes to the stars, so unalterably the same, subject to law and invisible force, no less than the human lives beneath them. The soft evening air, cooling her hot, aching eyelids, brought her back to a consciousness of peace in the external world. The whole creation was not groaning and travailing. Some were resting from work and watching; others were thanking God for some good thing that had befallen them. The day of health and rejoicing was dawning for some; hope was smiling on many; and life had entered other households. Lovers were meeting

beneath these stars and breathing vows of constancy, no shadow of falsity or parting hovering about them. The odorous west wind, travelling across the dewy meads and through woodland beds of hyacinths, blew softly above the syringa tree. A little bird turned in its nest under the window, twittering a sleepy complaint to its mother's downy breast. Medea leaned out in the stillness, a great yearning in her heart. Yet no tears came. Her grief was beyond such relief.

At the time of any great sorrow it often happens that we gain an increased perception of the beauties of the earth we live on. All the brightness and the gladness is not in harmony with our souls. When trouble and anguish have come upon us we cry out that Nature has no sympathy, for in her radiant moods she is out of tune with sad hearts.

To very few at these epochs does the

brightness of the sky, the scent of flowers, or the music of birds come as a consolation. We banish children because their merry laughter jars upon us. Grief is mostly selfish, and would wrap all surroundings in the pall of its own woe—would fain make others share its weight.

Truly those are great and noble minds that can lift up their hearts in praise because there are joys and beauties in the world to bless and gladden others. One that takes comfort from the thought that its own stricken heart alone knows its bitterness, and that the joyous earth takes no part in an individual human sorrow, is a rare and beautiful soul.

But to Medea, communing now with the unseen, the revelation of worlds outside *her* world came at this hour. As she looked long at the stars, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever, the strength of their eternity for a time reached her.

Myriads of human lives had blossomed and gone to dust beneath them. The finite nature of humanity shrivelled before their everlasting serenity.

Then a great calm of trust in what was above and beyond them, the power which upheld them and ruled their courses, came upon her.

Softly she cried, "Not as I will, not as I will, O God. Thou alone knowest and rulest what is best."

Then she closed the window gently and turned. With the first instinct of a nurse she glanced towards the bed. She started and went forward, her great eyes full of an unconscious entreaty. For the first time for many days Philomela's looks were fixed with sensible inquiry upon her. Then the sick girl's eyes wandered a little, glancing about the room with a puzzled look. Why was the lamp at her bedside shaded? What did this array of medicine-

bottles signify? Had something happened to her? Phil never remembered a day's illness in all her happy life. Her weak brain vainly essayed now to piece the present on to the past. Why was Medie sitting up with her? And why was her face so pale and worn, her eyes so very sad? She tried to raise her hands to ask these questions, but was fain to look up with weak protest at the face bending over her. A little gleam of the old impatience shone in her eyes. Why were her hands so heavy? It was difficult to make her fingers talk clearly. Perceiving the efforts of her bewildered mind, Medea spelt out to her slowly something of what had been. Phil nodded weakly, with the shadow of an amused smile playing about her wan lips when told she had been very ill. She hardly seemed to breathe, so weak and faint was the throbbing of her pulses. Her blue eyes had lost their fevered light

and moved about languidly, and all her pretty hair had been cut short during the days of delirium, when she had tossed it wildly about.

The next day broke, and still Phil showed no sign of amendment. Rather with every hour she grew weaker and her features more ethereal. She asked for flowers to be brought, naming those she loved best, and saying where they were to be plucked in her garden. She lay still for hours looking at them, when placed at her bedside.

In the early morning one day she inquired the month and the day of the week.

"My month," she spelt feebly. "Have the nightingales sung yet? Little brown bird, I would like to see you again."

Medea was alone competent to interpret the wavering finger language. On the third day of consciousness Phil's breath came laboriously. Her unshadowed face was as

white as the pillow, and her blue eyes turned heavily at any approach. Yet she was quite sensible and ready to take stimulants when offered to her. She did not use her hands the livelong day, and seemed now too weak even to smile her thanks for little services.

"I can do nothing more," groaned the doctor, watching her as she lay with half-closed eyes, hardly drawing breath.

They knew now that the beloved of the household, the once bright and radiant girl, was on the brink of the eternal shores. The beckoning angel tarried but a little space.

At nine o'clock in the evening Philomela appeared to be sleeping. The lamp was not lowered, for the dumb girl always asked for more light. Natural enough this for one who lived chiefly by sight. Medea was the first to see the dying girl's eyes were wide open. They were full of

a shining light, though an unmistakable shadow rested upon her face. She signed something which was not intelligible.

"What is it?" spelt Medea slowly.

Then the weak fingers touched the sister's hand held out and spelt upon it, as they were accustomed to spell and talk in the dark. The effort to use both her own members was unnecessary to Philomela.

"Tell mother," she had said in this indistinct way.

Medea quivered. Tell mother *what*? said her heart.

Moving swiftly to the adjoining room, she knocked a sharp imperative summons. The doctor came out fully dressed.

"It is the end," said Medea in a suffocating voice.

Charlotte, poor mother, so soon to be bereaved, when roused from her sleep, came confused and dazed by the sudden awakening.

"Phil wants you," was all the doctor said.

He hurried her movements, finding her slippers and dressing-gown, but she did not understand what it all meant.

The night was almost oppressive. There was no longer any danger in the evening air. The citadel was conquered, and all the lesser foes might come in. The doctor threw open the little casement. Philomela smiled faintly as a cool wind stole over her. With her mother's arm beneath her head, she lay serene as a little child going to sleep. There was no struggle, no labour in her breathing, only it was fainter and slower every moment.

"Love me," she had spelt at her mother's approach. That was ever Phil's way of asking a caress. Medea, standing apart at the foot of the bed, did not ask for last kisses or loving words, only watched for the least sign that she might interpret.

Her sister's speech was unintelligible now to any others. Phil had often been impatient with slow and stupid companions who could not grasp her meaning. Ah! never impatient any more, sweet Phil. Her eyes were always strained in Medea's direction. She knew whence the help came. Presently her wavering fingers went together once more.

"My birthday," they said.

"What does she want? What does she say?" cried Charlotte in the querulous tones of anxious love.

"She means it will be her birthday—to-morrow," said Medea in her quietest voice. Every sign of emotion had left her. She seemed frozen to stone.

The mother nodded a quick consent to her beloved one, drawing the dear head nearer to her breast, not perceiving the grey shadow creeping over it. Alas! Phil would keep her birthday in a new mansion.

Once more the feeble fingers uttered the thoughts so laboriously framed.

"Going away—to find my voice."

Medea shivered from head to foot. She did not repeat this. Only the doctor saw her head fall a moment on her breast.

The lovely smile irradiating Phil's face had no terror in it. Nor death nor powers of hell were able to shake her beautiful simple faith. She knew by some wonderful instinct that she was dying, but there was no fear for her in that thought. Philomela's talk of heaven, when she had spoken of a future life, had always been of where she would "find her voice." She had ever thought of it as a thing lost from this earth. It was to Medea chiefly that her childlike soul had opened out such fancies.

There was a long pause now. The ticking of the clock in the next room was audible in the stillness. The transparent

hands went together for the last time; but Philomela did not open her eyes now.

"Tired," she spelt, and turned her face closely to her mother's breast like a weary child. Then, with a little fluttering sigh, she slept the sleep of death.

Only the doctor knew she had left them. He moved to the open window to close it, as we so habitually close and darken our chambers in the presence of the mighty victor. At that instant in the shrubs below a nightingale lifted up its voice and burst into glorious singing.

The exquisite gush of melody, breaking on the stillness, startled the silent watchers. At that sound Charlotte raised her head, with eyes wildly dilating. Memory crowded recollections upon her in that short moment. Turning, she looked for help to Medea. But the girl's face was hidden in her hands.

Then the agonized mother felt the loss that had befallen her. She drew swiftly

away from her still burden, and gazed at the dead girl's face.

The blue eyes were quite closed : no light of love or mischief would ever shine in them again. But a lovely smile lingered on Philomela's lips.

With an exceeding bitter cry of despair, Charlotte threw herself across the quiet form.

"O God—my child is dead!"

But perchance Philomela had ere now woke to life in her heavenly mansion, had "found" her voice, and was singing a *Te Deum* on her new birthday.

CHAPTER IV.

"NOLI ME TANGERE."

NEITHER watch nor prayer availed any longer—the fear and tension were over. No torturing gleams of hope would again visit the bereaved ones. Philomela had taken her mirth and brightness away from them for ever, and nothing remained of her but that still piece of clay in the little chamber upstairs.

Oh how the nightingales sang in this early summer-time! It seemed to Medea that they had never before held such constant festival of music. At the opening notes, "Jug, jug, jug," startling her at noontide or at night, she shuddered and

trembled in an agony of sorrow. Yet she was tearless through all this sorrow. Though the beloved sister had been taken away, though the one human heart that had responded warmly to her tenderness was gone from her, she made no loud ado or demonstration of grief. She never wept. She could speak Phil's name without sobs, could even handle her things and lay them away without visible emotion.

On the third day after Phil had died Medea placed the dead girl's best-loved flowers in her hands and upon her breast for the last time. To-morrow she would be buried.

So long was she performing the last rites of love, that after nearly an hour Mrs. Jagger came softly to the door. Medea signed to her to approach the coffin. The marble face of the voiceless one still seemed to smile serenely, and her waxen hands appeared to clasp the flowers fondly to her

breast. She, who living had ever been the gayest and most restless of God's creatures, lay quite still. It seemed so cruel that the one who had so rejoiced in life should be stricken. This harmless loving existence, enjoying all things keenly, and revelling in the simple pleasures of a beautiful world, might surely have been spared.

"We must go," said Medea at last. "It is not her. We shall never see her as she was to us any more."

Then she went down to the deserted drawing-room. She knew before entering it that she would find Phil's work-basket on the table. All would look the same as usual. The housewifely keys she had always carried were hanging in the writing-table drawer, and some comic sketches, the last work of her busy fingers, lay inside the blotting-book. Medea's eyes fell on a long darn in the muslin curtain. She remembered that she had seen Phil's

hands busy mending it before she went to Hangerfield. Every scrap of ornamental work in the room was the result of her unflagging industry. It seemed now there were too many things to recall her. Medea longed now to forget for a little space.

She did not remain long in the desolate drawing-room. As she came out with Phil's little basket in her hands the doctor heard her step. Every sound was audible in the hushed stillness of the house. Even the dispensary bell seemed to ring in a muffled way, as if those outside had respect for the darkened windows. Once Medea had thought the constant bustle intolerable. Now her heart ached with longing for a footfall that would never come again.

The doctor, coming to the door of his room, beckoned to his step-daughter. He had been waiting for her. Her eyes, wandering casually, fell upon the vases on the mantelshelf. Phil had always filled

them daily with fresh flowers. Now there was a bunch of dried-up stalks and faded blossoms in them.

The doctor, closing the door behind Medea, signed to her to sit down. Instead of taking the chair indicated, she walked to the window and looked out. The blind here was not drawn down and the sash was up, for this room looked to the rear of the house.

"Have you seen your mother this afternoon?" began the doctor abruptly.

Since the blow had fallen Mrs. Morgan had been passive and irresponsible. She suffered her movements to be dictated without expressing any wish or inclination. She hardly seemed to comprehend what went on about her.

"Let her alone," the doctor had said sharply when the servants pressed food upon her.

It had been arranged that Medea and

her mother were to leave Lakenham as soon as the funeral was over. A change was necessary, and the house would require to be disinfected.

Medea took no special heed of the doctor's question.

"No; I did not disturb her. Mary Ann said she was lying down. She seemed sleepy all the morning."

No further trouble seemed possible. Medea was too much absorbed in what had gone before to look fearfully towards the future.

The doctor glanced uneasily at her.

Her eyes were fixed on some little gardening tools that lay rusting unheeded beneath the rosemary bush. There Phil had laid them down. That was where the forget-me-nots would flower shortly. They would bloom as brightly and cheerfully as ever, though the eyes that had rejoiced in them so greatly would not rest upon them.

Medea was not giving much attention to what the doctor said to her.

"Medea, my poor girl, are you able to bear more? Our troubles are not over." The doctor's voice was unsteady. She turned and looked at him in a surprised way. "God help us!" he cried; "your mother has taken the fever."

A sigh broke from her. She was moved at last. During the two days past she had given no heed to her mother's condition. Her quietude seemed only natural beneath the stunning blow.

Now the fountain of Medea's locked-up grief was unsealed. A rush of blinding tears came to her eyes. What a hopeless sorrow had not effected the new dread did. She leaned, sobbing, against the window-sill.

"How can I bear it?" she said in faint tones. "She will die, too."

The next day all the symptoms of fever

were fully declared, and Medea began her task anew with a leaden weight upon her heart.

She would not hear of any hired nurse. She was strong, and she would take rest in the daytime. It would not be necessary to have more assistance than the household could give her.

And the doctor, knowing her untiring zeal and patience, yielded to her entreaties. No trained substitute could minister more ably or carefully.

"I am well—quite well. You may be sure I shall not break down," she reiterated with grave certainty when the doctor scanned her face or felt her pulse. "I eat and sleep. You know I do all that you tell me. My brain is clear and my pulse is steady. Do not be anxious."

From the beginning poor Charlotte was delirious—quietly delirious. She murmured incessant, restless complaints. Most

often she went back to the days of her early married life and to her children's babyhood.

"Hush! Your papa will be angry if you make so much noise," she would say twenty times consecutively. Especially did her mind fix itself on Philomela and incidents of her childhood.

Wandering words wrung Medea's heart with inexpressible anguish.

"My baby Philomela is very pretty, you know. Listen how she laughs. But why does Dr. Morgan look so gravely at her?" Then again, "Oh yes, my daughter Medie is very clever, I am told; but she has not warm feelings like little Phil. Medie will have her own way, and she despises people who don't know history and astronomy. Come here to me, my precious Phil. Ah, love! you can't hear me, they say. Hush! Do not let the nightingale sing so loud. Shut the window

quickly. Oh, Nicholas, pity me! She is deaf—quite deaf—not hearing any sound at all; and dumb—quite dumb—without any voice. And you said that she might like music! It was cruel, very cruel, to give my baby that name!"

Disconnected babblings, still having reference to the earlier years of life, records of past miseries and small blisses, went on continually. Sometimes it was the theme of her second courtship and marriage.

"They say Dr. Morgan is going to marry Miss Pilkington. Of course it is nothing to me. Do you hear, Mary Ann? I am going into Bedmondstone, and I think I shall buy a new cap. Oh no! I shall never leave off my weeds. Apollo, is that the doctor coming up the garden?"

No friends came near the infected house. A cloud of gloom seemed to have settled over it. Even letters were rare. Flora wrote at intervals, but during the days of

suspense her letters were very brief. A wild and childish epistle full of incoherent expressions of grief had followed Philomela's death.

"Oh, Medie, if you knew," it ran, "if you only could know how happy I have been all the time that Phil was ill. It seems so wicked now. I made plans for every day, and did not think much about her. It is so nice to be here, and to have pretty things about me, and it is never dull and ugly like at Lakenham. It seems wrong now to have been wearing smart clothes and always thinking of pleasure. And she is dead, and I shall never see her any more; and I was unkind to her often, and laughed at her ugly dresses and dirty hands——"

It was a pitiful letter, full of sorrowful regrets, showing that Flora's small soul had been touched by the sudden bereavement. Medea pardoned all, thinking of her pink-

and-white sister, the winsome little tyrant of old, with tender pity, thankful that she was spared a closer knowledge of sickness and sorrow.

When Mrs. Morgan's illness had declared itself, Flora wrote again imploring that she might be allowed to return. This request was set aside at once both by Miss Dorothea and the doctor.

Dr. Garstone came and went daily now from Bedmondstone, for Dr. Morgan had lost all confidence in himself.

"A grand nurse, that young woman, Miss Longstaffe; one in a thousand, I declare," he said to his wife. "No nerves, no fancies of her own, always cool and collected, and readier to obey than to talk and suggest. But it's a bad case. I'm sorry for Morgan, poor man."

The days crept on with leaden feet. Fitful gleams of consciousness visited the sick woman, and then she was gentle,

almost grateful, to Medea. When she wandered her ravings were weaker and less intelligible.

One night Medea was persuaded to go to rest. It was the first time she had surrendered her evening watch. The heavy slumber of exhaustion overcame her, and she did not wake at the hour she had appointed to resume her place. The doctor had promised to call her if there was any need. At daybreak she heard some one enter her room and draw near to her sofa, where she lay in a dressing-gown. In a moment she sprang up.

"I am ready," she said as if in answer to a summons.

The doctor stretched out his hand to arrest her. It was icy cold.

"You will not be wanted any more. Your mother is dead, Medea."

Then her eyes dropped on his face, and in the dim light of the dawn she saw the

grey pallor of his skin, the anguished lines about his lips.

"Dead!" she cried. "Oh no, it cannot be!—it cannot be! God has been very cruel to me."

Yes, indeed, poor Charlotte was gone, haply to hear the singing of the beloved one who had "found" her voice. She had died quietly in a gentle sleep, with only the doctor to watch her last moments.

To Medea it seemed incredible that she, who had spoken gently to her a few hours ago, had gone from her with no word of farewell.

Oh, it is sad when estrangement and coldness have come between us and the lost one, to realize that understanding and love can never be re-established, that no bridge can ever be built over the chasm of death. The bitter knowledge came home to Medea that opportunity was gone from her, that the alienation of distance was irrevocably

widened. It was well-nigh unbearable. Her heart cried with passionate desire, "Love me, me also, oh, my mother!"

Vain yearning of an anguished soul! Her voice could not carry into eternity's silence. It had seemed that Phil far off might bring her mother's heart nearer to her own, that the link of a great love for a lost one might bring them together. In her long night watches she had prayed that the hours of convalescence and sweet talk of the one that was gone might soften her mother's heart towards her. But it was not to be so, and all the years of Medea's life she must carry the heavy recollection of a departure without reconciliation or understanding established. Life gave no further chance of accord. The immutable decree had gone forth.

To us it is a hard matter if our beloved go but on a little journey with angry words at parting. We are haunted by fears, we

are stricken with remorse, magnifying our own sin; we watch for their return with contrite dread. Yet who can compare this transitory pain with the anguish of an eternal separation, when no renewal of loving deeds and words is possible?

As the days went by Medea was slow to learn a full submission.

"God has been cruel," she said morning and evening.

Oh, the sharp anguish of a sudden awakening at the dawn of day, and the slow realizing by the drowsy brain of the pain of loss! New every morning is the grievous thought that the beloved one is no longer there to be ministered to, that our cares are not needed, that our words of love and sympathy avail not to reach dull ears!

Mrs. Morgan had been buried a week. The mother and her favourite child slept in the same grave in Lakenham churchyard. Medea had never visited it yet. What

consolation could there be in looking on the place where her dear ones rested?

"Why not me, too—why not me?" she moaned in the night-time, stifling her cries that the doctor might not hear them; for he watched her with dread anticipation. She had exposed herself to a double risk.

But the days went on, and Medea's wild prayer was unanswered. Her splendid constitution gave no sign of collapse.

One bright afternoon in June the doctor came into the drawing-room and found Medea gazing listlessly out of the open window, as she was accustomed now to do for hours.

"Put on your hat and go for a walk, Medea," he said.

She made a sign of unwillingness, and then, turning her eyes upon him and seeing his distressed gaze, she rose to comply.

"Where am I to go?" she said wearily.

"Anywhere, so long as you keep out of

other folks' way. Lakenham woods will be best. Remember, you are still dangerous."

She went down the garden slowly, a tall black figure, with no life in her step. The sun was shining brightly on Phil's flowers. The garden had surely never been so gay before.

Medea turned down the lane in a mechanical way, and presently found herself in the familiar copses. Here there was deep shade and a brooding silence. The birds were still during the hot hours of the afternoon and no little breezes stirred the foliage. At her feet there was soft herbage, with bluebells still lingering here and there and the graceful butterfly orchis delicately poised. Medea plucked one of these fantastic flowers in absent mood. As she examined the curious conformation of the flower her head was bent down; she was not conscious of an approach. The steps were slow and noiseless on the grass; but as

she raised her head she looked down the glade. The fragile flower was crushed in her hand as she looked. A quick spasm crossed her face.

The man who was advancing leisurely had his eyes cast down. He was smoking, and apparently in a meditative mood. Medea turned swiftly and fled homewards before he caught sight of her. Like a frenzied thing, she ran across the fields and down the lane till she reached her own gate. Why had he come again? Was there no rest or forgetfulness for her anywhere? Was she to be tortured anew by a revival of the past, that past that seemed so long ago, with the long tale of sorrow between her and it?

How could she, who had suffered so deeply, who was yet so crushed, bear an interview, if he should attempt to seek her?

In many of the rooms at the doctor's house there were signs of packing; for

Medea was to go away from Lakenham the next day. By-and-by, when all fear of infection was past, Flora was to join her at some quiet sea-side place. All had been settled by Dr. Morgan, and she made no demur to his plans. Henceforth her duty was at Lakenham, and to do all she could for those who were left to her. Already she had begun to think of Flora's future existence, and to plan how she might brighten and vary the young life that found existence so monotonous here. Alas! Medea, that was not to be. Other lips would persuade the little soul to rise or fall, other arms would cherish this butterfly existence.

Medea, regaining the shelter of the house, sat down breathless and exhausted. In her wild flight across the fields she had not been able to think of anything but escape and of a hiding-place where he might not see her.

For a few seconds she pressed her hands

against her brow. Was it true? Had she really seen Sir Bruce?

"Am I delirious now?" she moaned.

She felt she must forget, she must drive his image, and all it recalled, from her mind. In a short space she went over to her writing-table and turned the sheets of manuscript upwards. Without removing her hat, she sat down and began to write steadily. She had worked fitfully during the past few days at the translation of a German book. The task occupied hands and head and kept her thoughts from dwelling on the past.

No visitors were now admitted to the house. Indeed, none came, for the whole place was panic-stricken by the double calamity that had befallen this house.

But this afternoon some daring stranger opened the garden-gate, and came, through the little belt of shrubs, round to the dining-room window. Apparently this visitor was

acquainted with the entrances to the house, for he sought the side door.

Medea, bending closely over her work, did not perceive an approach. The footsteps drew near noiselessly on the turf. Sir Bruce halted as he caught sight of her. The window, which had long ago been turned into a door for the sake of Philomela's frequent exits, stood wide open. There was a sun-dial on the grass plot without. Upon it Phil had caused to be engraved, "Let there be light." Beneath it was placed the little trough which the dumb girl had aforetime replenished daily for the birds. At this window she had loved to sit working, watching the movements of the living creatures outside with a never-ending curiosity and observation. There were swallows now twittering outside. Medea, hearing them, dropped her pen and looked up.

"Medea—Miss Longstaffe." The voice, so full of musical intonations, was half

apologetic. In a moment he had seen and marked the strange transformation wrought by grief.

She did not start. He noticed her colour did not alter. But she passed her hands over her eyes once more as if to clear away any false impression. Then she stood up and hindered his approach by an imperative gesture of her two outstretched hands.

"Do not come near me," she said quickly; "do not touch me. Have you not heard?"

The deep pathos of the "have you not heard?" is impossible to convey. He saw her altered looks, and noticed the husky thickness of her once clear voice. The blackness of the crape encircling her throat heightened the pallor of her face, and fitly framed the hopeless mournfulness of her features. All the roundness and bloom of youth had disappeared beneath the pressure of her deep misery. But for the expression of calm endurance, sweet in its despair, she

had little claims to beauty. Her great eyes were truly the home of grief and had lost their lovely lustre.

"Yes, I know—I have heard, of course. I am deeply grieved," he answered in a low voice, his own looks falling before the overwhelming sorrowfulness of hers. They were conventional terms of regret, but she did not heed them.

"Why did you come here?" She stood like an accusing angel, speaking in a steady voice of reproof. She went on, "It was selfish to come. The infection may be spread. Others have homes—others may suffer too."

There was a just wrath in her voice. He interrupted.

"I came charged with a message—to tell you that——"

She pointed away. "Go, go. What can it concern me what you have to tell? My mother is dead, and Philomela is gone from

me, too——" A wild look crossed her face. "Why have you come back here? Have I not suffered enough? Could you not leave me alone in my great trouble?" She steadied herself with both hands against the chair from which she had risen.

"I came this morning early—all the way from Hangerfield," he said slowly.

A presentiment of further evil crossed her mind. She moved a pace nearer to him.

"From Hangerfield?—you? Is it Flora?" she whispered faintly.

"Do not alarm yourself—your sister is quite well. But she wished me to—she sent me to——" Sir Bruce was palpably not at his ease. He proved himself a very sorry ambassador.

"Flora sent *you*—to *me?*" She looked vaguely at him as though not fully comprehending.

"There was news from the Cape in last evening's papers." He paused between

his sentences. He was unskilful in breaking evil tidings.

"Bad news?" said Medea in a whisper. "Oh, be merciful, and tell me quickly. I am ready to bear anything now."

Sir Bruce was quite near to her now. He leaned against the framework of the glass door. His dark eyes were persistently lowered. Medea had never heard that mellow voice hesitate or stammer before. All its confidence seemed subdued or checked.

"There has been an engagement. Your brother was wounded in it."

She staggered back a little, groping for the chair like a blind person. He advanced, thinking she might fall. But she signed him away as she sank on the seat.

"Do not be cruel in your kindness. I cannot—bear—suspense. Say it quickly if Apollo is dead."

Her anguished eyes were fixed on Sir

Bruce's face. No burst of womanly tears or wild sobbing would have been so effective as that quiet gaze of hopeless sorrow. Sir Bruce even felt his emotions disagreeably stirred.

"No, no. Do not anticipate evil. It is not as bad as you think. There is nothing definite known yet. His name is only amongst the wounded."

It was true that Sir Bruce had come from the neighbourhood of Hangerfield that morning. And it had been at Flora's instigation. She had known that the daily morning papers did not reach the doctor's house till late in the afternoon. Thus she had calculated that Medea would not learn the news at once. She had pleaded earnestly to Miss Godbold to be allowed to go herself to her sister and to break this last disastrous piece of news as gently as she could to one already sorely tried. But the old lady refused resolutely to allow her to run any

risk, and so Flora had recourse to a new friend.

"It is enough—he is sure to die. Nay, he may be dead. All, all is taken from me." Medea's voice dropped again to that distressing whisper. With an effort she seemed to remember her surroundings. "This house is not safe for any one. I forgot the danger. You must not remain here. There is infection in this air. You may carry it away. You have seen my sister Flora, you say. Did she send me no message?"

Sir Bruce shifted his position slightly. The light was now behind him.

"No; she did not authorize me to say anything. Yet——" The last word was almost inaudible.

"But there is something I ought to know. Lay aside subterfuge for once, I entreat you. This is not a time to play with words. Say it quickly, and go from here."

Sir Bruce answered more distinctly, "You have been separated some time from your sister; she has been away from Lakenham about six weeks. I imagine you know nothing of the circumstances surrounding her at present. You have not heard that she is engaged to be married?"

Medea, without moving, closed her eyes. "Now—at this time—thinking of happiness, building her own future? This is too much." She spoke with a touch of bitterness.

"Do you wish to know anything more—any details?" Sir Bruce said in quicker tones.

She felt without seeing that he was close to her chair.

"No, no; do not tell me. I shall hear it all in time. With death so near us all, how could she think of love? I have not seen Flora for many years. I thought she would be my charge now, but there is

nothing left to me. She is very young to think of marriage."

Sir Bruce's hand rested on the back of Medea's chair; his dark eyes rested upon her face.

"You will say good-bye to me?" he said at last. "When we meet again circumstances will have changed between us. We shall never be friends now. Is there anything I can do for you? Have you any message to send to Flora?"

Medea stirred a little. An expression like surprise crossed her face.

"Ah! you are going back to Hangerfield, then? At once?"

"My aunt has a place close by," he said briefly.

"You call my sister Flora, I notice. You meet her often, I suppose? Do not be too kind to her. She is only a child still. Do you know the man she is going to marry? Will he care enough for her?

But you could not tell me. Aunt Dorothea will know. Good-bye."

Sir Bruce extended his hand. She drew away from him with a strange sad smile.

"Noli me tangere," she said softly, pointing to the window.

And so he left her.

"Touch me not, for I am not yet perfected."

Verily Medea's heart had not yet made a full and perfect resignation. One by one her treasures had been taken from her, and she was left desolate. A complete and perfect submission seemed in this last hour to be further removed from her.

"Oh God, my heart is breaking!" she cried aloud, as an overwhelming tide of bitter recollections passed over her.

Through the clouds and thick darkness encompassing her she saw not the hand stretched out to bear her up, she heard not the voice whispering, "Come up higher,

my beloved." Stumbling, solitary, along a path full of difficulty, she waited for a dawn that seemed slow to come. The way was uphill, the light so far off. Would it be so to the end ?

BOOK THE SIXTH.

CHAPTER I.

MUSIC OF THE SPHERES.

That Robert Herrick was a crusty, bibulous old bachelor, eschewing female society, except that of his faithful servant, Prudence Baldwin, is well authenticated. In spite of this he wrote some of the most exquisite lyrics, amorous and otherwise, that our tongue boasts. The pet pig, his favourite companion, taught to quaff from the same tankard as its master, was slightly incongruous, to be sure, with sentimental notions; but it did not exercise any influence over the poet's refinement of diction, or mar the delicacy of his expression. Lay this to heart, all super-æsthetical and effemi-

nate aspirants to fame! Your exterior semblance may, after all, only belie the littleness of your capabilities. You feeble scribblers, to whom the rude prose of every-day life appears contemptible, pray recall the fact that a few notable poets have worn no linen, and have buttoned up threadbare coats over empty stomachs, or fed on coarse food and lived in low company. Nay, it is even doubtful if some of the great ones were ever in love; and it is yet more certain that some of them were constant.

But that very fine gentleman, Sir Bruce Onslow, though reckoned a poet, amongst other things, shared none of Herrick's tastes. He, having what he deemed a delicate mind, had a vast dislike for any palpable grossness. He loved cultivation, elegance, and style. Originality was a less important matter. He could make pretty enough verses, musical and metrical, with tender sentiments and playful fancies

woven in. Though there was nothing vigorous in such sonnets and lyrics as he wrote from time to time between more serious work, yet they were always accorded a place by magazine editors. They were graceful and inoffensive at the weakest.

These delicate effusions, however, flowered and flourished most freely on a new soil. The inspiration of a poem generally proceeded from a fresh adoration. A transfer of affection was invariably followed by some composition in verse.

More than a year ago a poem, rather more distinctive than usual, had excited some attention. It was called "A Modern Sorceress," and was more forcible and ardent than Sir Bruce's work was wont to be. Prophets rose up amongst critics and declared his muse's power and future fame, but there had been no subsequent expansion of genius to justify the prophet's honour.

In the month of May, but a few days after Flora's arrival at Hangerfield, a new poem from Sir Bruce's pen once more excited the critic's ardour. "An Idyl" was really a pretty enough piece of versification in its way. A magazine, with this latest effusion, was, of course, sent to Flora. Her fingers trembled in her haste to cut the leaves. He had signed it "Zephyr," leaving no room for doubt.

As she devoured the musical lines, describing the flowery woods, the budding trees, and the voices of singing birds in glowing terms, she accepted the composition as a wonderful work; but the tribute to a little shepherdess, conveyed subtly, caused her heart to beat and her face to glow with crimson blushes. Her meed of admiration for Zephyr was much greater when she had come to the last verse. Here was indeed a worthy appreciation of her charms. And how delightful

it was to have them catalogued and expressed on paper.

Finally, Flora carried her precious magazine upstairs and buried it in the recesses of her wardrobe, where no prying eyes were likely to discover it. Miss Dorothea was not told about it at all, and Flora had no other confidantes at hand.

As I have said, the smiles and pretty looks of women were needed to light the flame of Sir Bruce's poetic ardour. He was grateful to women on this account. They preserved youthful feelings, ministering to what he called his imagination. Recalling tender scenes, gentle glances, and emotional moods of thought, he transcribed them with a sort of thankfulness. Inconsistency, or inconstancy in himself, caused him no anxiety or remorse. He was not ashamed of any change of feeling. He was catholic, and not narrow, he stoutly maintained, if conscience craved a hearing.

If he had not looked into the depths of women's eyes, or if he had not sounded their heart-beats, his most meritorious verses would never have been penned. He was an æsthetic vivisectionist, if you like, a scientific lover who phlebotomized the main arteries of emotion and analyzed their component parts. The laying bare of a tender heart, the dissecting of a woman's feelings or motives, were curious experiments, satisfactory to himself, if often painful to the victim.

This is a monster, you say! Not at all, I assure you. Sir Bruce only enjoyed life, as he believed, above his fellows, profiting by his experience and knowledge of its many phases. He had loved Medea Longstaffe as much as he knew how to love. A certain fibre of resistance had been touched by the change in her. For the space of a few days a headlong passion and longing to conquer her cold-

ness had overcome his reason; yet it is doubtful if he would have married her, had she eventually yielded to his suit. That was a chapter well concluded, he was of opinion a couple of months later.

Sir Bruce had gone to the neighbourhood of Hangerfield, knowing full well that Flora Longstaffe was with Miss Godbold. He was privileged to visit his bedridden relative at will, but seldom availed himself of the permission. Miss Onslow's small estate would be his at no distant date, but he did not particularly care for the *rôle* of landlord. It bored him to be an object of respect and admiration to the rustics, and he was not particularly enamoured of the privileges of proprietorship. It was tedious to be chained down to one place, and Flatshire was certainly one of the dullest counties.

But at present there was a mitigation of monotony and dull days. Subsequent to

her adventure in Lakenham woods, Flora had met Sir Bruce at the rectory and elsewhere. Of course she appeared to him as a charming study of girlhood, a mixture of naïve innocence and astute worldliness, which was original in his experience, producing the most fascinating conflictions of action and speech. This open book he resolved to study.

It must be admitted that Miss Godbold behaved with exemplary kindness towards her young niece. To Flora she was uniformly cheerful, displaying no fierce ebullitions or alarming eccentricities. Indeed, she did all in her power to make the girl's visit pleasant, with a sympathy in young tastes quite unusual in an old mind.

Flora was taken to call at all the big houses in the vicinity, and made acquainted with all the young men of the district. These were agreeable distractions after her tedious seclusion at Lakenham. Miss God-

bold also provided her with a pony, purchased a tennis net, and supplied her with an abundance of light literature from a circulating library. There were frequent opportunities for the airing of Miss Flora's dainty frocks and coquettish hats, and six-buttoned gloves were no longer regarded as a useless extravagance. It is true that now and again qualms did beset her. Under the circumstances she certainly ought not to feel so absolutely happy.

"Aunt Dorothea, do you think it is wrong of me to go to this picnic while Phil is so ill?" she had said one morning, coming downstairs arrayed in a flowered cotton, with blue ribbons streaming.

"You can't do her any good, child, by staying at home; and it's too late to change your mind now. Mrs. Pettifer is going to call for you at eleven."

So Flora went, not unwillingly.

And there was a man with a Vandyke

beard and dark eyes and a quiet smile, waiting at the gateway of the ruined abbey to assist Mrs. Pettifer to dislodge herself from the nondescript vehicle she called her carriage. Mrs. Pettifer was the obese and obtuse spouse of a neighbouring rector. She did much reverence to Miss Godbold, and was proud to chaperone her lovely young relative to the few modest entertainments that took place. Flora opened her eyes and stared with undisguised surprise when she caught sight of her former acquaintance. How in the world had he come here? She was yet more amazed to see Mrs. Pettifer beam a warm welcome upon him.

"Oh, Sir Bruce," said the lady, "what an unexpected pleasure to see you! You are staying at Coddington, of course. How is Miss Onslow? When did you come down? Flora, my dear child, this is a very old friend of mine. I am proud to

say I taught him his A B C; for he is quite a distinguished man in these days. This is Miss Godbold's young niece—a great niece—Sir Bruce."

The man addressed bowed becomingly; and Flora, colouring, cast down her eyes. How could she say anything, since Sir Bruce did not think it necessary to inform Mrs. Pettifer that they had already met? Thus the wolf stole into an unguarded fold.

A sort of coy fear kept Flora close to her chaperone's side during the early hours of the day. She thought of the poem addressed to her, and dreaded some allusion to it—dreaded, yet longed for it.

The lovely young stranger was naturally the object of much attention. The hobble-de-hoys of the party brought her salt and sugar with persistence, in spite of their shy looks, while more confident curates replenished her glass with much *empressement*. But presently Sir Bruce took pos-

session of the girl, and all the others were driven back. Other young ladies surveyed her with envy, not only because of her fresh and fashionable toilette and bewitching looks, but because most of the men passed them by for her sake. Her silvery laughter, her childish *naïveté*, set them at such a disadvantage. Even an engaged young lady found her swain's eyes wandering all too frequently in Flora's direction.

Sir Bruce's manner was paternal and protective on this occasion. The dove was not teased or alarmed with overmuch attention or conversation by this wily serpent. Her candour and innocent worldliness, or rather love of earthly things, was highly amusing to him. She soon confided that her most pleasant experiences had been in the life of cities.

"I don't think I like the country," she said gravely; "there is very seldom any-

thing amusing going on, and oh, the evenings are so dull."

In no way did Flora recall Medea, whose tragic intensity was apt to keep this man at concert pitch. Here there were no piercing inquiries, no grave disapproval. This sweet little babbler expressed ingenuous wonder or childish satisfaction—nothing more. She was not original or conscientious overmuch.

This day of the picnic was bright and warm. Such sunshine and soft westerly winds early in May were rare. At a late hour in the afternoon it was proposed that the party should remain to view the ruins by moonlight. The shadows of a shattered Gothic window and a few infirm pillars in the nave would, of course, look exquisite by that romantic light. The sentimental young lady, whose lover's eyes did not gaze all too fondly in her direction, was the originator of the proposition.

As no one had any particular wish to be home early, and there were no rheumatic chaperones, the vote was carried. Sir Bruce, who "ever had some Dulcinea in his head wherewith to harmonize his soul," considered that he might be inspired anew with yet more poetical utterance, as he watched a rapture of delight kindle in Flora's eyes.

"No dull evening to-night," she said, turning towards him with blithe looks. "How pretty it would be here with Chinese lanterns and a good band!"

He did not shudder at her want of nice perception. Indeed, he freely forgave her this artificial heresy for the sake of her lovely looks.

Once more the luncheon-baskets were unpacked, and what remained of the contents set out. A servant was despatched for cream and a kettle to the nearest farm-house, and promptly a second meal was

done justice to, even by the most romantic. This was, however, partaken of before the moon appeared.

Flora, who had wandered much about the woods since luncheon, was a little pale and languid with the heat or her exertions. She sat with her back against a mighty oak tree, fanning herself with a horse-chestnut leaf, sipping tea in a dainty way. In the dusk her fair and fragile face had an ethereal look, while the dewy brightness of her eyes seemed to gather light as the shadows crept down above her golden head. By-and-by, when the stars began to twinkle out and the elders were talking in pairs, Sir Bruce bent his head to Flora's ear. Her fan ceased to move automatically.

"Come up the hill with me a little way," he said, with a wish to detach her from the rest. "You will get a better view of the ruins there."

She rose at once. She appeared less shy in his presence now. As they walked away together, side by side, she said pettishly—

"The 'gnats are so tiresome. See how they have bitten my arm." She pushed up the lace frills, revealing creamy flesh with little angry spots upon it. She lifted the white arm towards him.

"Poor arm!" he said in a low voice, bending to look at it till his lips nearly touched its soft beauty. I fear he was "harmonizing" his soul all too quickly.

They moved on a few paces in silence—a strange, eloquent silence to Flora. And the influence of the hour and of a woman's presence was upon him. His pulses were beating a little out of time.

"I am so tired!" the girl said at last in a breathless way. "See, there is a bench up there. Let us sit down."

In reality it was no lofty eminence they

had scaled, yet it afforded a vantage ground in a flat country. All that could be obtained in the way of a view was to be had here. And the ruined gateway, the Gothic arch, and unstable columns appeared now at their best, with the lady moon shedding a faint light upon their imperfections.

"Look at Venus, how large and steady she is," said Sir Bruce, with his elbow on his knee and his eyes fixed on his companion. If she looked at the star it would force her eyes upwards in his direction. Her face was turned from him now, but he could see the soft laces about her bosom rising and falling quickly.

Flora had heard of a certain naughty lady's notoriety in courts of love, mythology being diligently taught in French schools. She now thought there must be a statue somewhere at hand, and peered about her in the shadowy light with an unsatisfied look.

"Venus!—but where? I do not see her," she said with charming candour.

"Oh, not that amorous lady! So you know nothing of astronomy? It is really a charming study for four eyes. I mean that bright star just above the oak. There, turn your head like that, and I will teach you the names of the planets."

Her upturned face was close to his. He could feel her soft breath upon his cheek. She repeated after him the names of a few stars, making frequent mistakes. Flora was at no time a ready learner, and it seemed now very difficult to give her whole attention.

Meanwhile the moon rose higher, and some of the less occupied people below broke into singing. It was all novel and delightful to Flora, and she began to think the country had some compensations for the want of gaslights and artificial flowers.

Sir Bruce gently fanned the gnats away

from her face with the leaf he had taken out of her loose grasp. This man, who knew so well how to interpret every tremor and smile of the maid beside him, put no check upon himself. He went on in his musical voice, instructing, correcting, quoting.

"Oh, look now at that star falling! How very pretty! Why, it is like a *feu d'artifice*—a rocket, you call it," said Flora, pointing one hand upwards.

"Shall I tell you what it *really* is?" he said, smiling down at her with a look which made her eyes droop. He went on quoting, not waiting for any reply, "We call it a shooting star, but it is really—

"'A runaway spirit escaping on high.
A spirit of evil, entranced with thy beauty,
Attempts on the bloom of its freshness to light;
But, discovered in time by a sentry on duty,
He saves my beloved, and chastens the sprite.'" *

The emotional changes on Flora's face, as she listened with eyes cast down, de-

* Poem by S. Whiting.

lighted the artistic mind of Sir Bruce. No doubt the man's mellow voice was admirably adapted for reciting poetry by moonlight. It had a musical ring, and the stress on the word *beloved* further increased Flora's heart-beats. She sighed deeply—a long-drawn breath of happiness.

"Ah, you are very clever," she said, in a half-regretful way, "and I must seem so stupid. I think you would like talking to my sister—Medea she is called. She knows so much."

Here was a check to any further love-making. Sir Bruce rose up suddenly. His voice changed so much that Flora wondered if she had offended him.

"The dew is falling—feel how damp your sleeve is—and I hear some one calling to us. We must not keep Mrs. Pettifer's poor old pony waiting. Well, it has been a pleasant day—to *me*. Shall I see

you at Mrs. Pettifer's tennis-party to-morrow?"

And so the appointment was made and duly carried out. Daily Sir Bruce found himself more deeply involved in a new "harmony." This Dulcinea occupied his leisure hours pleasantly, and country dissipations no longer wearied him.

"My dear child, what have you got hold of?" said Miss Godbold, a few days after the picnic, as she came into the library, and found her frivolous niece at the top of a ladder with a ponderous tome in her hands.

"Astronomy," said the young lady tersely, descending with due regard to high heels. She placed the book upon the table, and bent her pretty brows fiercely over the work she had searched out, spreading forth a sheet of astronomical diagrams. Her determination to master geometrical mysteries was comical.

After a few minutes' diligent application, the difficulties seemed insurmountable.

"I wish Medie was here to tell me all about it. How difficult it is," she said, with a profound sigh.

Miss Godbold, looking up from her writing-table, remarked with friendly sarcasm—

"So you are gathering some idea of your own ignorance?" Then she smiled indulgently at the pretty face; it was so very pretty with the petulant frown. "And what has set you in this good way, my dear?"

Flora leaned back in her chair. Conversation of any kind was a relief after so much arduous study.

"The other night at the picnic they"—she coloured faintly, conscious that this *they* was an extension of persons—"they talked about the stars and planets, and things I have never heard of. I am sure

in Paris there is no Milky Way to be seen; or perhaps we never looked higher than the lamps — they were so pretty, you know."

There was a new wistfulness in the eyes that were raised to Miss Godbold's face. The old lady even thought there was evidence of nascent spirituality on Flora's face. What had given birth to it? It was to be hoped that Mrs. Pettifer had shown no dereliction of duty in suffering any amorous curate to do court to this innocent little maid. It was utterly out of the question that her lovely niece should be thrown away on any of the local clerics, however worthy he might be in his own esteem.

"I shall go down to Mrs. Pettifer's with you this afternoon, my dear," said the old lady at luncheon, with a determination to give checkmate to any audacious lover. "Have you any idea who will be there?"

"The two young Robinsons and their sister," said Flora promptly, "and I think —very likely—Sir Bruce Onslow." There was a too evident hesitation in Flora's final words which, perhaps, betrayed her.

"Oh," said Miss Dorothea, putting down her knife and fork promptly, "that gay Lothario!"

"He is very fond of tennis, you know," said Flora a little more confidently.

"Oh, is he? I did not know." And Miss Godbold got up from her seat and walked to the window, which was a sign she was perturbed in spirit.

Sir Bruce had contrived to see Flora almost daily without once calling at Hangerfield, and Miss Dorothea had not been aware that he was visiting in the vicinity.

"He has taught me some back-handed strokes," said Flora to her aunt's back.

"Oh, indeed!" responded the old lady, in her dryest tones.

"Don't you like Sir Bruce, Aunt Dorothea?" said Flora, a little wistfully after a few seconds' silence, during which she made little moons and stars on the tablecloth with her fork.

"Ask him if he likes me, my dear. We are always very polite to each other."

With eyes fixed absently on the tablecloth, Flora began again presently—

"Aunt Dorothea, I always thought that men liked girls not to know things as well as themselves. Do you think, perhaps, I am mistaken, and that they like them better to be clever, and to spell without making mistakes?"

Alas! Miss Godbold, the serpent has entered the garden. The torch of love was lighted a week ago under the stars, and all your endeavours cannot put it out. When Flora went daily to Mrs. Pettifer's in such gay spirits and in such pretty gowns why

did you make no inquiries concerning those she met there? But how could you guess that when Flora remained at the rectory to dine, it was because Sir Bruce was there? Neither could you imagine Mrs. Pettifer would be so indiscreet as to allow the young people to go out and hear the nightingales.

And all this time Phil lay dying, with other nightingales chanting a farewell to her bright spirit.

During the afternoon Miss Godbold changed her mind, and, instead of going herself, sent an excuse for Flora's absence. This precipitated a disclosure. The maid, forbidden her tennis, dissolved in tears. Questions and answers elicited finally a full confession. Yes, she loved him—loved him dearly—and he had said he loved her.

The disaster was more complete than Miss Godbold could have believed. Full

of wrath and fury unspeakable, she sent off a special messenger to Coddington, with a summons for Sir Bruce.

The next morning he called to deny the charge laid against him. With the utmost coolness and self-possession he bore the brunt of Miss Dorothea's accusations, smiling superciliously at intervals. When she had spent herself he calmly declared that she was mistaken throughout, that he was not playing fast and loose with her sweet charge, but that he had every intention of marrying her. Under the circumstances of sorrow and sickness at her home, was it imperative or seemly that he should woo and win her publicly? There was a complete understanding between them, of course. Did Miss Godbold demand of him that he should go to the girl's mother at once and crave her sanction to an engagement?

"Why, then, did you not acquaint me

with the matter, and with your honourable intentions?"

Miss Godbold could not resist an emphasis on the "honourable," and Sir Bruce, meeting her eye, guessed that she was acquainted with the former passages of love between himself and her elder niece.

That might be all very well, he answered with sarcasm; but she had shown at all times that his presence was distasteful to her, and in consequence he had not presented himself at Hangerfield. He never felt sure he might not be shown the door. She had only herself to blame for what she was pleased to call a clandestine love-making.

Miss Godbold, foiled at every point by his perfect imperturbability, required to put strong constraint upon herself to check an outburst regarding Medea. But that would have been a betrayal of maidenly modesty, and she was compelled to force

back the bitterness that was in her. She could not say that Sir Bruce Onslow was an unfitting husband for her niece, except she were to disclose what she knew privately. He was not gross or immoral, nor a spendthrift, nor a drunkard. In the world's sight Flora would make a good match. It was impossible that Susan Onslow could live many months, and then Sir Bruce would come into a nice little property. And his birth, and talents, and personal appearance were all favourable.

In this interview with Sir Bruce Miss Dorothea for once got the worst of it. It was all too evident that Flora was rapt in admiration if not in love for this young man. It was probably a feeling as near akin to love as her feeble little soul would ever experience.

It was an abominable treachery to Medea to transfer his affections to her sister—a poor little doll—within such a short space

of time. It would have been a glorious privilege—the keenest enjoyment—to have whetted the razor of her tongue upon this perfidious lover. But she must forego this glorious triumph, must rebut the keen desire out of respect for the girl she loved so well. Medea had been thought unworthy of the crown of wifehood by the very man who now had the courage to lay his heart at her sister's feet. A paid companion at a German court, however noble or talented, held a different position to the petted niece of a county lady.

As she looked at her antagonist, Sir Bruce was aware of contempt of his baseness in the lady's gaze. Oh, Miss Godbold, your looks were very eloquent. You need not have regretted the bar on speech. Might he see Flora before he left the house and assure her that all was smoothed over? The sweet little soul might fret herself ill.

To this request Miss Godbold was perforce obliged to consent. His intentions were declared, and she could not deny him the ordinary privileges of a lover. Then to Flora there came a few halcyon days of perfect bliss before the news of sorrow at home came.

With the announcement of Philomela's death, a gentle remorse for her own joy oppressed her; but when the shortly succeeding death of her mother was broken to her, her anguish was really keen. She begged hard to go home; but both Sir Bruce and Miss Godbold refused consent. Her sorrow was so pretty and seemed so real that the old lady had not the heart to forbid her lover's frequent visits.

So Sir Bruce came and went very often, and his fetters became fixed and acknowledged. The girl suited him admirably in all respects. She was young and plastic, and he felt sure he could mould her

opinions to his liking. Her opinions only, for he did not care particularly about cultivating her mind. He rather preferred women without overmuch mind.

She worshipped him without doubts or questionings, pouring out sweet incense and praise without stint. She had no high standard of feeling or enthusiasm to measure by, and all he did and said seemed good in her sight. Her innocence, her ignorance, her worldliness—which might even be called unsophisticated, for a more subtle understanding would have essayed to hide it—pleased him. She was absolutely different to any woman he had met, and the novelty charmed him.

It was only when, in ignorance of former circumstances, she imposed upon him the task of visiting Medea, and breaking the last news from the Cape to her, that he felt the strain of the tie binding him. It might not be agreeable in the future to be

brought in close contact with his sister-in-law. Nevertheless, an interview would have to take place sooner or later, and there would be a certain boldness in announcing the matter of his engagement to her himself which fascinated his fancy. How would she take it? The consideration of himself, and the attitude of others regarding him, was always in the ascendant. Of Medea's own personal trials, of the double bereavement that had befallen her, he had not thought much. He was apt to put away as unpleasant and hideous the ghastly thought of death. He was an epicurean in the perverted sense of that word.

Consequently, her subdued and broken spirit and the intangible dignity of grief had surprised him. He felt more than before that her fortitude and exceptional depth of feeling were beyond his sympathy, almost beyond his comprehension. Such angelic

natures were not cut out for daily companionship, and an element of littleness was needful to him.

After he had taken farewell of Medea he was better satisfied than before with the prize he had drawn.

CHAPTER II.

HYMEN'S TORCH.

In the month of August Lakenham Hall was again enlivened by the presence of the McCrackens. The head of the house, if possible more self-assertive than before, made frequent proclamation of his social successes during the past season in town. He had been admitted to a duke's dinner-table, and had been allowed to place his opera-box at the disposal of a marchioness. Perhaps he was not aware that the duke in question had a view of establishing business relations with the successful man of trade, having some half-dozen professionless sons on his hands. Neither, perhaps, did Mr.

McCracken take heed of an elderly Lady Ethelreda, who was a millstone round the marchioness's neck. This noble virgin, uncourted by men of her own rank, smiled with encouragement on the man of biscuits from his opera-box. But at present it was not of much avail, and in private conversation with Rachel he derided her angular shoulders and scanty locks.

Rachel had accomplished great things, in her own opinion, during her sojourn in Eaton Place. She had established a safe footing in aristocratic circles, and her little dinners in town had been pronounced perfect by authorized judges. During this autumn campaign in Flatshire, she fully intended to drive in the wedge and split any remaining difficulties. Old Madam Ringrose would yet leave a card at the Hall.

Lady Wrexham no longer vexed her soul by offensive tactics, having absolved

her from the crime of angling for Tom. But Rachel could afford to do without the countess's patronage, when she had half a dozen peeresses of greater pretensions on her visiting list.

Of Sir Bruce Onslow the McCrackens had seen but little after Easter. The news of his engagement to Medea's young sister was first communicated by Miss Pilkington.

"She's quite a child, I assure you, Miss McCracken. It's perfectly wicked to allow such a match. Mrs. Morgan, poor woman, would never have given her consent, I feel sure. But there's only the doctor and Medea left now to look after her, and neither of them overburdened with common sense."

Rachel was certainly very much surprised. This sudden veering of Sir Bruce's affections was beyond her comprehension, and there did not appear any great advantages to be reaped from such a union.

"And you say they are really to be married before Christmas, Miss Pilkington?"

"Yes," replied the lady severely; "and in very bad taste, I call it, after the great affliction of two deaths in the family, to hasten the wedding in this way."

Rachel gave a little sigh, expressive of sympathy.

"And I hear that young Mr. Ringrose, of the Abbey, has come home at last," said Rachel.

"Yes, indeed," said Olivia; "and looking a perfect savage, with a beard like a bush-ranger, and the complexion of a Red Indian. I'm told his own mother didn't recognize him at first sight. He certainly never had much beauty to boast of, and he isn't improved. They say he's engaged to a young American lady, who used to hunt buffaloes like a cow-boy; but her ladyship doesn't approve of the connection, and old Mrs. Ringrose won't hear of it."

It was perfectly true that Tom had returned from his globe-trotting expedition, having wearied very soon of the picturesque and natural. Rumour was not far wrong in allotting to him a *fiancée*, only she was a young Australian lady, fair enough to see, but as wild as one of her native kangaroos. Physically and mentally she was a complete contrast to the last lady to whom Tom had protested so much. Nevertheless, she was a true-hearted little woman, full of spirit and able to defy her mother-in-law. In defiance of his family's opposition, Tom eventually married her, and was very happy. She carried a pretty fortune with her, and after some notable timber-jumping in the shires, she achieved a considerable reputation in the hunting world. Old Madam Ringrose eventually condescended to receive her daughter-in-law at the Abbey, but to the end of the chapter Tom's little wife made open fun

of the august lady with the Roman nose.

Not long after her return to Lakenham Rachel went down to the doctor's to call on Medea. A certain degree of curiosity impelled her to take a look at Sir Bruce's bride-elect. Anything half so lovely she had not expected. The peach-blossom face and the little head "sunning over with curls," must be quite irresistible to masculine perceptions. The grave and stately Medea could not compare with this fragile piece of clay, at once so childlike and so lovely.

"Apollo is coming back to us very shortly. He has distinguished himself very much in this war, you know," said Medea at parting, looking Rachel straight in the face. "He has got his company now."

Rachel would have suspected any one else of deliberate meaning in the remark,

but it was impossible to lay diplomacy or malice to Medea's charge. This was certainly not a welcome piece of news to the young lady from the Hall.

The advent of a detrimental lover might seriously interfere with her matrimonial prospects. It would be necessary to hasten matters a little now.

A weak young lord, not an eldest son, but fairly eligible, because he had an elder brother still weaker, had been nibbling about Rachel's lines for some little time past, and she had very decided hopes of landing her fish.

It would never do to have Apollo sighing at her feet at this juncture. Still, as Rachel reflected complacently, she had not committed herself towards that young soldier. She appraised her own wisdom in having dropped a futile correspondence soon after his departure. If she could only secure Lord Algernon Rienfair at

once and appear before Apollo in the *rôle* of an engaged young lady, the matter would be satisfactorily concluded. She went home from the doctor's plotting diligently after her wont and fully resolved to accomplish her task.

When Mr. McCracken was informed of Tom Ringrose's engagement it is needless to say that his hope of winning Medea's favour revived. It would be extremely mortifying to that young lady to feel herself so slighted, and no doubt she would be ready to accept a new suitor at once. Mr. McCracken persuaded himself that he was quite as eligible as Tom Ringrose, bar youth, which to a person of Medea's character would have no charm.

Having suffered from vindictive feelings at various times in his life, this gentleman was ready to believe that similar sentiments were easily evoked in the minds of his neighbours. The pettiness of a mean

and common nature cannot leave a margin for any breadth or generosity in the soul of another.

After due consideration, he quite decided to lay his heart and fortune at Medea's feet. It may seem strange that with his ambitious views he did not think of a more aristocratic partner. But Mr. McCracken preferred a wife whom he could elevate to one who would elevate him. "Riding the high horse" was a favourite objection of his used in connection with certain well-bred ladies of Rachel's acquaintance.

At first this elderly lover had thought he would place the advantages of his position before Medea in writing, but second thoughts induced him to forego his bombastic effusion. In the remote event of a refusal, it might bear witness against his folly. Therefore, Mr. McCracken once more put himself out of the way to make a call at the doctor's

house. He had previously commanded Rachel to invite "the doctor's girls" to luncheon, with a view of proposing in his own conservatory, but the invitation had been promptly refused.

It is needless to relate that Mr. McCracken came away from his interview with Medea blaspheming and cursing his folly. With such cold decision, if not contempt, had she set his pretensions on one side, that the mortification of rejection was trebled.

"The ungrateful jade!" he muttered repeatedly on his homeward way, writhing, if anything so rotund could writhe, at the recollection of her majestic disdain.

In the park he encountered Olivia, wending her way towards the Hall. She, smiling tenderly towards him, acted the part of Good Samaritan towards his vanity. She poured upon him the oil and balm of profuse flattery, and his self-

esteem was partially restored to him before he reached his own doorstep. The lady's insinuations against Medea Longstaffe were a blessed salve to his wounded feelings. Miss Pilkington introduced the subject of the Longstaffes in the most casual way, and Mr. McCracken, for once unsuspecting of feminine guile, had no idea that this lady was playing a well-considered part.

"There have been many changes in our little corner since your departure in February, Mr. McCracken," she said with mournful expression.

"Not many as I see," rejoined the gentleman, disposed to argument. "There ain't a spinster the less that I've heard of. Ha, ha!"

This was too bad of Mr. McCracken.

"Are you not aware that death has been busy in our midst?" continued the lady. "It was a sad calamity at the

doctor's house in the spring. Poor man, my heart has bled for him many a time."

Mr. McCracken cast an observant glance out of the corner of one eye at the woe-begone Olivia. He resented the mention of death. It was not seemly in the upper circles, he was sure, to talk of the universal foe.

"And Medea," went on the doleful voice, "is anything but a sympathetic companion to one in deep affliction. She is a person, as I may say, completely wrapped up in herself and her own pursuits. Now, would you believe it, she never went near her mother's grave for more than three months, and the very week after the funeral she set to work translating a new book. She is utterly without heart and feeling."

In this Mr. McCracken was willing to acquiesce, but he was cautious not to rashly commit himself to any statement

which might qualify Miss Pilkington to believe he was anything more than an acquaintance of the Longstaffe family.

"And Hymen has lighted his torch for your friend, Sir Bruce Onslow, we hear," Olivia continued, with an effort to be sprightly.

Mr. McCracken looked somewhat nonplussed. Who the deuce was Hymen?

"Flora Longstaffe will make a pretty little bride."

Then Mr. McCracken was set free from his dilemma.

"I call the fellow an infernal fool to lose his head over a pretty face. He might have made a fair market for his handsome looks and good blood, if he'd have waited a bit. He ain't one as is privileged to give a fancy price for a wife, in *my* opinion."

Then Olivia explained. "But, Mr. McCracken, I am told that he will inherit

a nice little property from an aunt on the other side of the county, and we all know that Miss Dorothea Godbold intends to leave her fortune and savings to the Longstaffes. They will have eight or ten thousand apiece, I suppose, now there's only three of them left."

This was sorry news to the rejected suitor. He had almost twitted Medea with her penniless position, and here was testimony that she would at any rate be comfortably provided for. His coarse insinuations regarding her poverty and dependence had been groundless after all. In vain had he swaggered; to no purpose had he provoked her gentle spirit. He could not now experience the satisfaction of believing he had wounded her susceptibilities or pelted her with that hardest of substances—the truth. He smarted beneath the conviction that he had made a double fool of himself. But it would

never do to let Miss Pilkington think that he had been ignorant of the Longstaffe expectations.

"There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip," he said oracularly. "Likely enough the old woman will turn rusty some day, and leave her fortune to a hospital."

Then Miss Pilkington turned the subject agreeably, and so adroitly tempered her speech with flattery that Mr. McCracken forgot his misfortune for a while. When they reached the Hall he was on the best of terms with himself and his visitor.

A few weeks later the hard-featured Lady Ethelreda, accompanied by her mother, an obese marchioness, who loved champagne and sumptuous living more than her own soul, came down to Lakenham. The multitudinous boxes and personal paraphernalia foretold a long siege.

Lord Algernon Rienfair was already at Rachel's beck and call, also making himself very much at home amongst the partridges, and invariably using Mr. McCracken's green cartridges. It was not many days before Rachel accomplished her destiny. The announcement of her engagement was not long in finding its way into the papers. Thus it came to pass on Apollo's first visit to church that Rachel posed before the public as an engaged young lady. Lord Algernon, a dapper little man, with a small snub nose and a weak moustache, was not a lover to be particularly proud of. Neither was the Lady Ethelreda a comely virgin, with angular shoulders and faded appearance. The aristocratic party in the Hall pew required their birth well advertised.

Apollo, with his arm in a sling, and wearing his honours bravely, did not compare unfavourably with Miss McCracken's

future husband. Once casting a stealthy glance towards him, she sighed faintly. If it had only been possible?

And Apollo, how did he feel? Answer me that, you young men who have been discarded by some heartless jilt. Perhaps, with his glory thick upon him, the sting of faithlessness and treachery did not rankle so deeply. I know only that in this situation he bore himself with courage and dignity, making no sign of pain or wound.

Before October days were past, Hymen had also lighted his torch for Mr. McCracken. The Lady Ethelreda had not smiled in vain upon the man of biscuits; and the marchioness received him as a son-in-law without any disparagement.

Rachel was wedded in state during the autumn, with a duke and two duchesses eating her wedding-cake and estimating the cost of her wedding gifts; for all the

insignificant relatives at Clapham and Putney gave handsomely on this occasion. The spirit of modern times at such ceremonials is, "To her that hath, much shall be given."

CHAPTER III.

FAREWELL.

My foot is in the stirrup, and it behoves me to take leave of all you, my friends, who have accompanied me so far. If you have perchance travelled without weariness along a commonplace highway, I have to thank you for your sympathy with everyday lives, for your patience with follies and frivolities, and perhaps, for your compassion for failure and sorrow. The illusions here recorded are not grand or heroic, and there are no deeds which demand admiration, and no tragedy to enchain your interest.

Yet perchance some of you may have

felt that the petty and obscure things of this life are full of pathos, and that what is ordinary and frequent, much that we consider mean and trifling, is quite as deserving of our pity as of our contempt.

Having landed some of my passengers, it is necessary to bring the tale of their doings to an end. The argosy of some hopes has reached an anchorage in the voyage of life, while the ardent enthusiasms of others have met with cruel shipwreck. So it must ever be in this world. For fruition of confidence and faith is not reached by the most trusting. So they are lured to a higher "beyond," so they are taught to look beyond the stars.

Amongst some of our travellers there are those you will not be sorry to see no more. You will not take a friendly farewell of these. Perhaps you may not have seen the last of them, for their images or their doubles may yet be met in this

great world. Haply, if you come across another Rachel, Olivia, or Sir Bruce, you will consider my puppets as types or portraits.

Yet there are a few more words to say regarding some of the actors who have tripped across this stage.

You may be pleased to be assured that Apollo did not wear the willow for Miss McCracken's sake. Also that little Letty Pilkington no longer needs to cherish withered flowers in memory of him, or to water darns and rents with bitter secret tears. She is a proud little wife, only a little heart-heavy and anxious when her handsome husband is on foreign service. And Apollo stands high in military favour at this day. He is one of the most dashing young officers of these troublous times, who has no difficulty in getting staff appointments. He has well atoned for his youthful folly.

Rachel's partner, little Lord Algernon Rienfair, is a comparatively insignificant member of society in comparison with her rejected lover, who is a V.C. and has been distinguished by royal favour. A love-match appears to this fashionable little lady a more desirable achievement nowadays. She is clever enough to have grown weary of her spouse's inane conversation. Often tired of the social treadmill she walks, she envies Letty her calmer lot. These ladies are on visiting terms in town, but Apollo's wife maintains a decided distance in her courtesies towards the biscuit-maker's daughter.

Lady Ethelreda McCracken, who now reigns at Lakenham, wears indescribably handsome diamonds, which cover up her scraggy neck, but her nose is no degree less red than of yore. Considering her plain looks, her friends are of opinion she has done remarkably well for herself.

Lady Onslow, once upon a time Flora Longstaffe, is a recognized beauty in society when she is allowed to appear in public. But she spends the greater part of the year in seclusion on Sir Bruce's property in Flatshire. Whether he is jealous or not able to afford the extravagances his wife would launch him into is undecided. She certainly does not glorify her lord and master with any of her former incense of worship, at times even displaying an irritable humour towards him. The glamour of love is apt to pass away beneath the trying ordeal of familiarity. Perhaps that alone is the crucial test of its deep roots. Ordinary love certainly needs a grindstone. Even strong affections become blunted by daily use of the same material. Those who are wise sharpen their edges occasionally in different ways—by absence, or the distractions of society, or novelty of some sort in their demeanour towards each

other. There was no whetstone for Flora's passion, and had it not been for a couple of lovely children, regarded by Flora as dolls for much finery, her days would have been unbearably monotonous. Marriage had promised her relief from the tedious routine of Lakenham, but the promise had not fulfilled itself. She had only been removed to a higher sphere of dulness. The study of astronomy has long been given up, and she has ceased to wonder if men admire clever women. Sometimes she grumbles that Medea is selfish, and that there is no necessity for her to be tied to the doctor's household. For it is only rarely, when Sir Bruce is absent, that her sister can be persuaded to pay her a visit. As long as Miss Dorothea lived, Flora maintained pleasant relations with Hangerfield. Sir Bruce had intimated that he wished it so. At one time Flora's husband enjoyed the conviction that the old lady would make

her her sole heiress. Herein he was mistaken, for after Miss Godbold died and was buried, she was found to have made her will with strict impartiality. Her invested property was divided equally between Apollo and her two nieces; Hangerfield going to the former, and her valuable jewels and silver being divided between Flora and Medea. A desk full of her private papers was left to her favourite niece, Medea.

In seclusion, Sir Bruce took up romance, and published some very successful works. He was pronounced a man of sentiment and deep feelings by the critics. His wife used regularly to send Medea the new publications.

And of our dear Dr. Morgan and Medea Longstaffe what more can I say? Their lives flow on calmly in the old red-brick house, if not in complete happiness, certainly in harmony and peace.

Medea never talked of resignation. Onlookers who magnified their own Christian virtues said she did not bend before the storm as she ought to do. But are not humility and submission oftentimes fine names we give to our cowardice and despair? Medea did not say, "My life is valueless now, and I will struggle no more to take any active part in others' happiness or gain." She could not sit down and fold her hands in submissive prayer and aspiration. To her, as to all the great-souled, prayer was action.

Many illusions and errors, beautiful and persuasive, have passed away from her mind since we first knew her. One by one the fallacies of hope and young enthusiasms have fallen from her. But they have not left her faithless or without comfort. She had not made a prison for herself out of her passions and failures and sins; but, casting them from her, she was

not compelled to beat her wings against a cruel cage or cry in her maturity that she could not get out. Now all her resources were called out, and many duties devolved upon her. To the doctor she was friend, counsellor, companion. Her thoughtful observances, her cares and attention, made the closing years of his life happy. Little daily performances of loving duties, gentle words, and tender deeds are verily the fringes of love's more serviceable garment. They do not add to its use or strength, but they make it beautiful.

"How very often Miss Pilkington comes here," said the doctor one day to Medea as he watched the lady disappearing across the Green.

"Yes, she is very kind," said Medea abstractedly; "she is always bringing some little present. She has left a dish of sea-kale for you," she added, taking up a basket.

The doctor pulled a wry face. Miss Pilkington's manœuvres were quite transparent to him; but how could he say so when Medea looked at him in that guileless way?

However, Olivia schemed in vain, only inducing a colder demeanour on the doctor's part. Finally, at the age of fifty she retired to Bath, and courted a venerable Indian judge sedulously for a couple of years, in the end winning his affection by her constancy, or some said her judgment in the matter of curry powders.

And now I have to take leave of Medea. Probably very few are satisfied to know she lives and dies unwedded. But to Apollo's children she is all her life another name for goodness, and even Flora's spoilt little dolls appreciate Auntie Medie's kind ways.

She was one of the women whose lives need no widening influences. For it is

not to the most loving and full-hearted that are always allotted new ties of home, husband, and children. Where love is native it needs no fostering.

Let us cease to pity those who, having perhaps lost all they best loved and valued in early life, have not grieved irrevocably, but have bravely and faithfully taken up the cross of loneliness, till in the end their cross has borne them and many others onwards with it. For them finally the clouds will part, the dawn will break, and earthly shadows will flee away. Farewell, Medea.

THE END.

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